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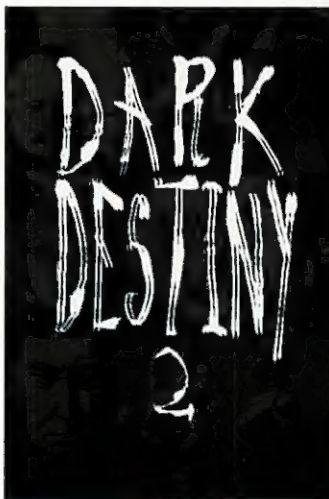


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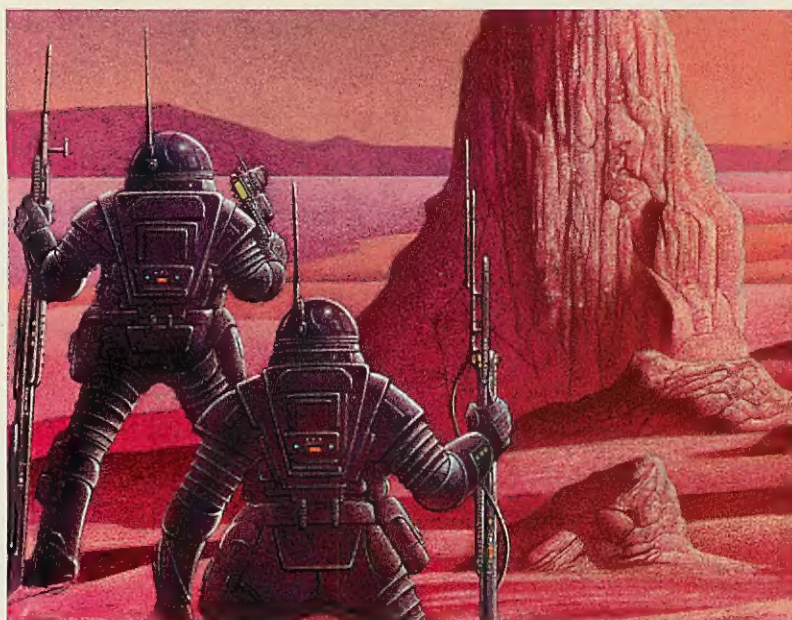
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COVER: A trio of interstellar craft at last reach their final destination. Art by John Berkey.

ABOVE: Journey to the red planet Mars—it's as close as page 76. Art by David Beck.

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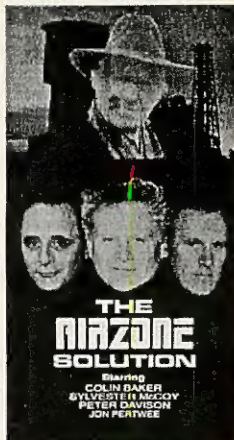


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Dear Mr. Edelman:

Congratulations on having a story in your magazine win a Nebula Award. It must be a wonderful feeling both for you and Ms. Soukup, as it was her story and her first time winning a major award. You should both be proud.

It does lead me to ask you a question, though. I myself am an avid Hugo nominator, and some of the other science fiction magazines make my life easier by specifically listing the stories they publish under headings that are more descriptive than just "Fiction." That is, they indicate which stories are novels, which are novelettes, and which are short stories.

Is there any reason why *SF Age* doesn't do this? I think it might encourage more people to nominate your stories for awards. After all, no one wants to be told that their nominating ballot is invalid because of an incorrect categorization—and more award nominations would mean more exposure for your fine magazine.

Sincerely,
Michael A. Burstein

An interesting idea, Michael. Frankly, when we designed this magazine, we didn't consider the need for such distinctions—we just tried to get the best stories possible. But your idea does have merit, and if there is enough reader demand for such, we will begin earmarking the stories as you suggest.

Dear Sir:

Although I'm sure that you don't want to clutter the Letters page with a running argument about the Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence, I'd like to respond to the letter by John Medinger in the September issue. Let me first admit that I didn't reason as well as I might have in my letter in the May issue. I should have considered all of the transmissions which now reach out fifty light-years or so before criticizing SETI.

I should point out, however, that the published letter was edited to about 130 words, down from over 500 in the original. There I argued why I thought it possible that an ETI might be hostile.

John Medinger's underlying assumption seems to be that an ETI will necessarily be civilized as we understand the term, i.e., benevolent. Even if it is not hostile, it is probable that our interests and those of the ETI would conflict. I, for one, would prefer to be the stronger party in such an event.

I think that before SETI succeeds, or before Captain Kirk's message gets through for that matter, we need to focus our energies on overcoming the degeneracy and devolution

we seem to have embraced at present. We need to get a program of eugenics on track as soon as possible which will eventually produce a more highly evolved species of human; one that will surely be better able to deal with an event such as contact with an ETI than we can now.

In the meantime, keep up the good work.
Yours truly,
Bryan O'Driscoll

Dear Mr. Edelman,

I enjoyed the essay by George Zebrowski in your September issue. I was surprised to learn that several of my favorite authors were included in his list of neglected SF writers. For my money, A. E. van Vogt is one of the best SF writers of all time. It's a crying shame these talented writers haven't received the recognition they deserve.

Mr. Zebrowski observed that the list of neglected writers will continue to grow. With this in mind, are the writers of asinine drivel taking over from the really good SF writers? I hope not.

Sincerely,
Donald Sullivan

Dear Mr. Edelman:

Until your September issue, I had thought that the staff and writers for *Science Fiction Age* were fairly literate, but after the foreword to "Spondulix," I wonder.

You used the incorrect and tired cliché "money is the root of all evil." Referring to the source, the first letter of St. Paul to Timothy, chapter 6, verse 10, the correct quotation is "the love of money is the root of all evil."

Please don't let this sort of thing happen again.

Sincerely,
Chapman Burke

Dear Mr. Edelman,

Just a note to thank you for a great magazine, especially the latest September issue. It's full of interesting stuff. As a 56-year-old reader, I especially enjoyed George Zebrowski's Essay on writers I've enjoyed so much, mostly as a youngster.

All the features were interesting—haven't read the fiction yet. Congrats on the first Nebula!

I love the art and general pizzazz of *Science Fiction Age*. Keep up the good work!

Yours,
Gene Tuck

Readers—please let us know how we're doing at: Letters to the Editor, Science Fiction Age, P. O. Box 369, Damascus, MD 20872, or E-mail to S.Edelman1@Genie.Geis.Com.

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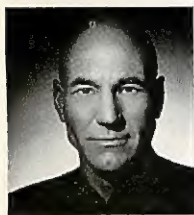
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EDITORIAL

By Scott Edelman

SF's sense of wonder is matched only by the magic of its words to live by.



Buried in old SF are as many nuggets of wisdom as in Bartlett's Quotations.

I HAVE BEEN READING SCIENCE FICTION FOREVER. (Well, perhaps it only *seems* like forever.) As with most people who are addicted readers, I have my favorite novels and short stories, but I often come away with something more. Sometimes a writer encapsulates a mood or idea so perfectly that in a sentence or a paragraph he or she gives us true wisdom with the precision of a laser. When I come across one of these bits of wisdom, I write it down on an index card. And since SF has formed a large part of my lifetime reading experience, it only makes sense that the concise passages of words to live by that I have chosen to jot down throughout the years have come for a large part from science fiction.

"Writing science fiction for twenty years might not be the best preparation for life," wrote Barry N. Malzberg in his classic novel *Herovit's World*, "but here and there he picked up a little knowledge." The same might be said for reading science fiction. SF, beneath its plots, can give us advice on how to live our lives. Even though Theodore Sturgeon, in his famed short story "Slow Sculpture," wrote that "I think people who live by wise old sayings are trying not to think," there is in fact plenty to learn from the wise old sayings of SF.

It is important to remember, however, that writers use words as tools in many different ways. Sometimes they use them for narration, and other times make their characters speak them. Often, the idea that ends up on the page is the opposite of what the writer truly believes.

No matter. The words I quote for you here have a truth all their own, a truth that transcends the author's agreement or dispute with them.

Are you wondering how to deal with those who are jealous of your success? Then console yourself with Robert A. Heinlein's words in *The Puppet Masters*: "Luck is a tag given by the mediocre to account for the accomplishments of genius."

Are you concerned about the proper way to wend your way ethically through the world? Then listen to Samuel R. Delany in his short story "Night and the Loves of Joe Dicostanzo." "You've got to learn to take to take the responsibility for what's yours and stop trying to assume the glory for what's not."

Does true love elude your grasp? In George R. R. Martin's "Meathouse Man," we are warned: "Of all the bright cruel lies they tell you, the cruelest is the one called love." A more optimistic accounting may be found in Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.'s novel *The Sirens of Titan*: "A purpose of human life, no matter who is controlling it, is to love whomever is around to be loved."

Those of us who would not be pigeon-holed by circumstance will gladly embrace Roger Zelazny's words in "He Who Shapes." "Statistics aren't the same thing as destiny."

Are you worried about what death will bring? Then heed Kate Wilhelm, who wrote in her short story "April Fool's Day Forever." "The fear of death is a disease as dangerous almost as death itself."

If you marvel at the wild ideas some people will swallow, then Isaac Asimov in "Far, Far Below" will have you nodding in agreement: "There seems to be a rule that the more foolish an assertion, the more ardently people will believe it."

If reading science fiction fills you with a sense of wonder, you might feel compassion for the words of Carter Scholz in "The Eve of the Last Apollo": "He had never been religious, but space made him feel as he imagined God might make other people feel."

There is even advice on how to run a magazine, such as the following from Damon Knight's introduction to one of his *Orbit* anthologies: "I was a little shocked once, in the early fifties, when Tony Boucher mentioned casually that in a recent issue of *F&SF*, there was only one story that he had bought solely because of the author's name. I thought that was one too many. Famous names may help sell a magazine; they don't always, but if they do, it's because those writers have written good stories in the past. Every time you publish a poor story by a famous writer, you diminish the value of the name and defeat your purpose."

I take these last words very much to heart as I edit *Science Fiction Age*. Because in ferreting out the best possible stories I can find, I aspire to bring you pearls worthy of the samples above, quotes that you perhaps may be moved to copy out in order to create your own personal compendium of SF words of wisdom. Welcome to yet another bi-monthly attempt. □



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BOOKS

By Paul Di Filippo

David Brin uplifts SF with a state-of-the-art space opera.



After an eight-year absence, it is time to return to the Uplift Universe. Cover art for *Brightness Reef* is by Michael Whelan.

OUR STORY THUS FAR: In the near future, mankind has progressed to the point where it has assumed rational custodianship of the Earth's resources (living and nonliving). Employing bioengineering and sophisticated prosthetics, humans have "raised up" dolphins and chimps to the status of equal partners, endowing them with sentience. Using home-grown technology, the three races have begun to explore the solar system. It is at this point that the Terrans are contacted by representatives of an incredibly ancient alien culture that spans not only our home galaxy, but also four others! Grudgingly, these aliens agree to admit humanity and its "client races" to the community of the Five Galaxies. Our entry requirements are fulfilled mostly by our having gifted our cetacean and simian cousins with intelligence. But there is still a problem and a mystery to be resolved.

Who raised up humanity?

The aliens hold as strict dogma (supported by eons of evidence) that the unmediated evolution of sentience is Darwinically impossible. The most that blind evolution can do is plant the potential seed of presapience. It always requires the sophisticated agency of one intelligent race to "uplift" another.

Where then are humanity's patrons? Never before has the chain of transmission been broken, in all the billions of years of recorded history. Are the patrons of humans

extinct or in hiding? Have records been deliberately expunged or kept secret? And how will humanity, the "wolflings," survive in a cut-throat milieu in which alliances and lines of patronage are all-important?

Quite well, it seems. Not without peril and suffering, but survive and even flourish they will.

Any fan of state-of-the-art space opera will hardly fail to recognize this briefly sketched scenario as belonging to David Brin's Uplift series. The first three volumes in this series all received their share of attention. *Sundiver* (1980) was hailed as a fine debut novel. *Startide Rising* (1983) won both the Nebula and Hugo, while *The Uplift War* (1987) had to be content with taking home a mere Hugo.

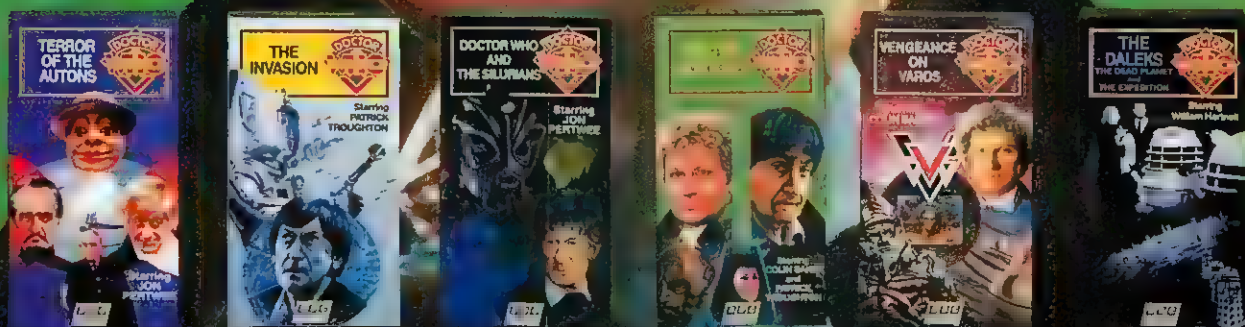
Now, after an eight-year abstinence, eager readers can re-enter the Uplift universe in Brin's new novel, *Brightness Reef* (Bantam Spectra, hardcover, \$22.95, 582 pages), "Book One of the Uplift Trilogy." They'll find a lot that's familiar, but also a lot that's engagingly strange and unexpected. Whereas *Sundiver* was a self-contained yet necessary preamble, and the action of *Startide* and *Uplift War* ran in parallel and was intricately interconnected, the events of *Brightness Reef* occur in a time and place which at first bear no obvious connection to the earlier books.

The planet Jijo exists in one of the Five Galaxies that is not our own. The various Galactic councils, in accordance with long-established doctrines, have deemed that it is time for Jijo to go fallow for a few million years. This policy is intended to promote the development of new presapient species, which can later be uplifted in the eternal quest for more and more varieties of intelligence. (The galactics are nothing if not long-range planners!) Accordingly, the race which owned Jijo, the Buyur, agree to erase all traces of their cities and works from the planet and depart. Jijo goes under strictly enforced quarantine.

Well, not so strictly enforced. Over the course of two thousand years, seven small ships have penetrated the quarantine, seeding Jijo with seven intelligent races: glavers, traeki, hoons, humans, qheuens, urs, and g'Keks. The races have emigrated illegally for a variety of reasons. But over the centuries, a common culture and creed have evolved. The various sapient species are living under a pall of guilt for having violated the sanctity of Jijo. Having destroyed all their hi-tech goodies upon arrival, they now conduct a low-tech, minimal interference lifestyle, with the ultimate goal being devolution to presapience. The glavers, in fact, already have attained this goal of bestial mentality. Such is the state religion among the existing six races, with some sects pursuing more or less radical paths.

Immediately, a major difference is apparent. In the earlier books, devolution was the most awful fate that could befall a client race. In *Startide*, the dolphins continually strove not to get lost in the Whale Song of their ancestors. Those that did were monsters, instrumental in the near destruction of *Streaker*. In *Uplift War*, a similar ethos prevailed among the chimps of Garth, where sim-

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ple monkeylike behavior was condemned. Brin's chimps and dolphins, in fact, have their roots in the surgically altered animals of Wells' *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896). "Four legs" is always bad.

While it's true that certain individuals among the Jijoans don't subscribe to this planned reversion, those who do are presented in a noble light by Brin. They are not mocked or reviled. In fact, the sympathies of the reader are initially with this faction—at least until push comes to shove, and the fanatics among them actually begin murdering and burning to achieve nescience.

It's no surprise that the major proponents of the minority view are the humans. They were the last to arrive on Jijo, a mere two centuries or so ago, and yet they revolutionized life on the planet, raising civilization to a new level. The humans were both peacemakers and wisdom-spreaders. They united the six races with treaties and conducted the "Great Printing," dumping the contents of their ship's library to book form, before consigning the device to the oceanic burial reserved for hi-tech items. And it is ultimately with the humans that Brin's sympathies reside.

This privileging of humans is continuous throughout the series. Although Brin is the

furthest thing removed from a species-chauvinist (in fact, the grand theme of the series is liberty, equality and fraternity among all sentients), humans, the "wolfings" (*pace*, Gordon Dickson's influential novel of the same name from 1969) still stand as unique exemplars of creativity, cunning, and endurance. In *Uplift War*, the weakest of the novels to date, this attitude degenerated to the level of the most simplistic Eric Frank Russell or Christopher Anvil canned plot: Crafty, seemingly outgunned humans outwit ostensibly invincible, yet dopey aliens. (Perhaps this potent myth is some sort of racial memory of our mammal ancestors subverting dinosaurs.) In essence, this Campbellian credo (present also in the utterly non-hard-SF motif of psionics) is at the heart of the Uplift series. A human savant in the new book is actually named Lester Campbel (sic), a name which manages to echo a certain del Rey as well. To Brin's credit, such a bias never becomes unpalatable in this new book, where the aliens all share equal amounts of the spotlight.

Over the course of a hundred pages or so, Brin familiarizes us with Jijoan history and locales, and introduces the main viewpoint characters (for the first time in the series, Brin employs first-person narrators, the most

BOOKS TO WATCH FOR

The Dream Cycle of H. P. Lovecraft: Dreams of Terror and Death, by H. P. Lovecraft (Ballantine). The worlds of SF and horror often merged in the work of this seminal author. This volume contains twenty-five classic stories, and includes an introduction by Neil Gaiman.

The Michael Crichton Companion, by Janet Berliner (Ballantine). Everything you ever wanted to know about the writer whose books gave SF *Jurassic Park*, *The Terminal Man*, *Westworld* and more, prompted by his latest print to screen translation, *Congo*.

The Microcosmic God: The Complete Short Stories of Theodore Sturgeon Volume 2, by Theodore Sturgeon (North Atlantic Books). The continuing compilation of every word of short fiction from the father of humanist SF. Ask the next question; read the next story.

The Jules Verne Encyclopedia, by Brian Taves and Stephen Michalouk (Scarecrow Press). He took us around the world in eighty days and journeyed to the center of the earth. Read about how he invented science fiction. You can't look forward without looking back.

The Silent Strength of Stones, by Nina Kiriki Hoffman (AvoNova). The popular author follows up her critically acclaimed *The Thread That Binds the Bones* with a look at another branch of her quirky, magical and secretive family of sorcerers and shapeshifters.

Bloodchild: Novella and Stories, by Octavia Butler (Four Walls Eight Windows). This Hugo and Nebula award winner recently won a MacArthur Grant, adding even more weight to the reasons why you should track down this collection of her complete short fiction.

The Ultimate Alien, edited by Byron Preiss, John Betancourt, and Keith R. A. Candido (Dell). Fifteen tales of contact with alien life, courtesy of Arthur C. Clarke, Anne McCaffrey, Mike Resnick, Ed Gorman, and others. With an introduction by Robert Silverberg.

Dinotopia: The World Beneath, by James Gurney (Turner). Gurney's first dinosaur volume proved to be an art book bestseller; you can see why in our January 1993 Gallery. Revisit the hidden world where dinosaurs still live, peacefully coexisting with mankind.

A Starfarer's Dozen: Stories of Things to Come, edited by Michael Stearns (Harcourt Brace & Co./Jane Yolen Books). Young adult SF by Martha Soukup, Lawrence Watt-Evans, Nancy Springer, Gregory Feeley, Jane Yolen and many others. Illustrated by Michael Hussar.

The Essential Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde: The Definitive Annotated Edition, by Robert Louis Stevenson (Penguin/Plume). The archetypal novel of a scientist tampering with things best left unexamined is reissued in an elaborate edition that leaves nothing unexamined.

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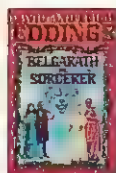
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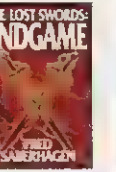
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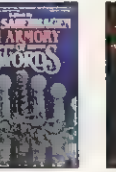
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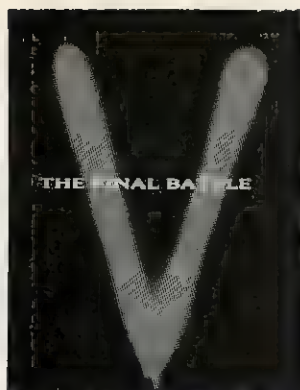
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charming of whom is young Alvin the hoon, who is a budding writer and inveterate reader of such human authors as Clarke and Silverberg). Then he tosses a spanner into his stable culture. A galactic ship lands during a crucial time. Are they officials of the powers-that-be, bent on enforcing the quarantine and punishing the interlopers? Or, perhaps worse, are they interstellar outlaws of the worst sort?

As Brin propels his large cast of characters through many exciting events (with both personal and cosmic import), various mysteries proliferate. The galactic ship is manned by humans—and they claim to have onboard several of humanity's newly discovered patron race, the Rothen! Subtle clues reveal that the action of *Brightness Reef* is occurring shortly after that of the earlier books. Perhaps the largest enigma is that presented by the mysterious stranger: a wounded, amnesiac, aphasic off-planet human. I don't think it will be giving away too much to state that he's an ex-member of the *Streaker* crew. How he and the other humans ended up in a different galaxy so soon after the events of

Startide remains unexplained.

In fact, the ending of the book is bound to frustrate. Although local problems are tidied up fairly well, all the large-scale issues remain in suspension, awaiting the next volume. (The *Derelict Fleet* receives a bare single sentence mention.) Brin even feels compelled to apologize in an afterword for stretching his story across three books and promises "to bring out volumes two and three promptly."

Still, despite these flaws, the *Uplift* series, as embodied in its latest entry, remains a parable for interspecies understanding, a subtle, almost mystical testament to the role of intelligence in the development of the galaxy, and a rousing adventure in the *Planet Stories* mode.

Flag in Exile, by David Weber, Baen Books, 442 pages, \$5.99.

Flag in Exile is the fifth in a series about Captain Honor Harrington. Honor is everything you could want in a heroine—athletic, tough, disciplined, intelligent, beautiful, and sensitive. A former captain in the Royal Manticoran Navy, newly retired and disgraced,

Asimov, The Spirit, and More!

THE NEWEST SUPERHERO TEAM TO enter the comics world is the brainchild of one of the Grandmasters of SF: Isaac Asimov's *I-Bots* (Tekno-Comix) are five genetically cloned androids who were intended to represent a new era in human development, but instead become outcasts. Before his death in 1992, Isaac Asimov created these superhero characters who, in addition to

COMICS

their amazing powers, are bound to behave according to the dean of SF's own Three Laws of Robotics. Together, the group must fight for their survival against governments, corporations, and criminal organizations. Superteam guru George Perez, who has previously penciled *The Avengers*, *Justice League of America*, and *The New Teen Titans*, tackles the art chores with inker Josef Rubenstein, while Steven Grant provides the words.

What are we to make of a comic book that features the talents of SF and horror prose writers such as Joe R. Lansdale, Charles de Lint, Neal Barret, Jr., Roger Zelazny, and others? It would indeed have to be *Weird Business* (Mojo Press), the aptly named anthology title edited by Lansdale and Richard Klaw. The eagerly awaited hardcover, 380-page volume contains both original material and adaptations of classic horror and SF tales. Some of the highlights include "That Hellbound Train" by Robert Bloch and Phil Hester,

"Jesting With Chaos," an all-new Elric story by Michael Moorcock and Shea Anton Pensa, and "Becoming the Monster" by Poppy Z. Brite and Miran Kim.

Will Eisner revolutionized the comic



Above, Asimov's cloned *I-Bots*.

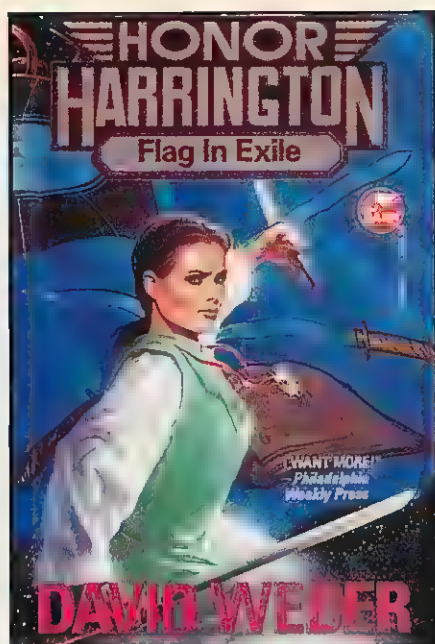
book field. His masked hero, *The Spirit*, influenced a generation of comic book artists. In 1952, Eisner took his famed creation on a voyage of interest to both genres when he transported *The Spirit* to the Moon. *The Outer Space Spirit* (Kitchen Sink Press) collects what was to be the final run of the famous feature, illustrated by the perfect artist to launch the previously earthbound hero: Wally Wood, EC Comics' master SF artist. □

Map of the scattered islands around the coast of the Gulf of Mexico.

heartbroken by the death of the man she loves, by this installment in her adventures, Honor has retreated to her adopted home on the planet Grayson and taken up her role of Steadholder—a Grayson position something similar to being a feudal Lord or Duke. Conservative socially, Grayson is technologically and socially backward compared to Manticore. Honor has brought in advanced technology and encourages more egalitarian attitudes. These changes, plus the fact that she is a woman and an outsider, have upset a political faction on Grayson. It doesn't take long for them to start plotting.

In the meantime, the People's Republic of Haven is planning a new move in the old war, one that threatens Grayson. Asked to lend her expertise to the newly organized Grayson space navy, Honor agrees, even though she has doubts about her ability to command and fears she has lost her edge. Soon, Honor is once again thrust into battle to save her adopted home.

Although I like military SF by Heinlein, Orson Scott Card, Lois McMaster Bujold, and the brand new writer, David Feintuch, I find it a guilty pleasure as well. It is, after all, about war, no matter how distant in time and space the events are set. This military SF novel is clearly space opera. Features of the world are not totally meant to be taken seriously: Honor's adopted world has sword fighters, Honor's pet is a telepathic treecat, classical Grayson music is based on something from



Old Earth known in the records as "country and western." Faster than light travel and other science fantasy elements could be added to this list. These elements are enjoyable, fun touches and lighten up the book, but cannot really cover up the fact that a lot of people die here.

I had two questions when starting this book. First, would I be able to pick up enough background to enjoy and appreciate the drama, even though I was starting with a mid-

dle volume in a series? Second, this being military space opera, would it contain believable human complexity?

There was always plenty of background in this novel. Usually with the fifth in a series, not much background is needed because the hero is an old friend, and the conflicts are familiar, with some previous enemies and friends showing up and favorite places revisited. Anyone reading this series in order would find that true here. But for us first time readers, Weber provides plenty of background, not only on Honor, but on the planet Grayson, the Manticore Alliance, the enemy People's Republic of Haven, telepathic treecats, sword fighting, geodome engineering, military strategy, and Grayson's religion.

Which leads to the second question: Would this novel be full of believable humans? Again, the answer is a rousing *yes*. There are almost too many characters.

People in space opera tend to be bigger than life. For all her extraordinary virtues and abilities, Honor Harrington is far from a cold, stoic commanding officer. She cares about the deaths of her people and the deaths of her enemies. She regrets being forced into battle. Honor sincerely cares about the world she is defending.

Nor is Honor the only well-drawn character. Protector of Grayson Benjamin Mayhew IX, Reverend Julius Hanks, Honor's bodyguards and eventually her bridge crew are interesting, appealing characters. Weber's

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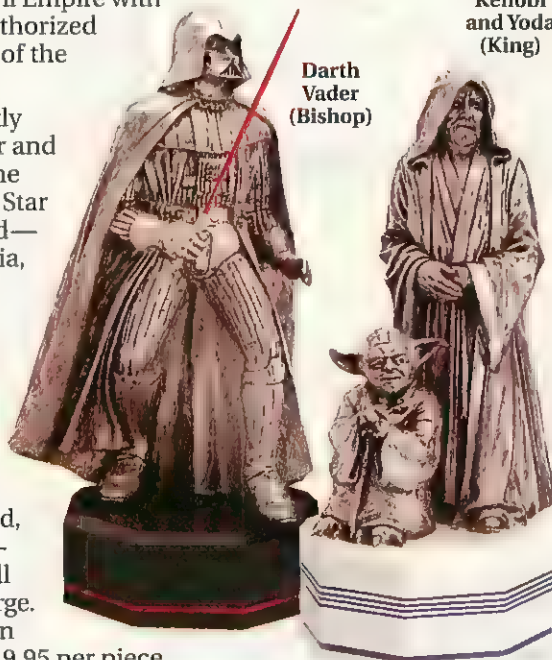
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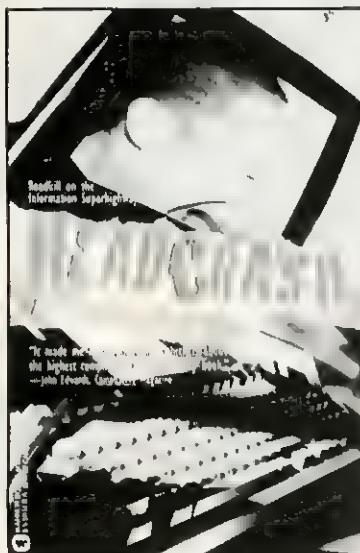
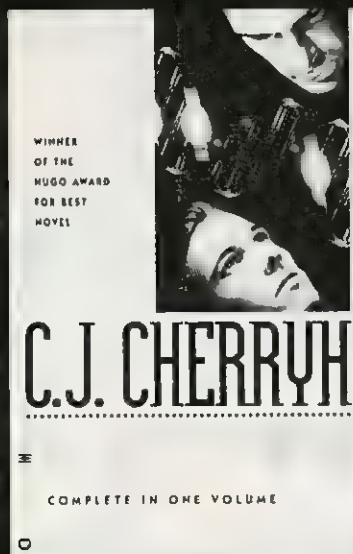
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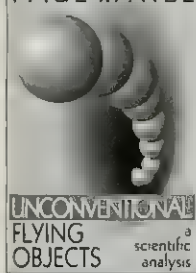
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viewpoint changes frequently and even some members of the People's Republic of Haven, such as Citizen Admiral Thomas Theisman, are well-drawn characters. Even small roles such as Honor's Lieutenant Jared Sutton and the Peep tac officer Shannon Foraker are treated with respect and made real with small, believable details.

Flag in Exile is an excellent job of world-building, full of interesting characters, and plenty of action. Friends of Honor Harrington already know this world, and now there's a chance for the rest of us to discover it.

Rachel Russell

AMNESIA MOON, by Jonathan Lethem, Harcourt Brace & Company, 256 pp, \$20.00.

Last year Jonathan Lethem's first novel, *Gun With Occasional Music*, got the sort of reception a young writer dreams of: boffo reviews in the major trades and consumer press, film offers, award nominations, infomercials, and threatening posthumous letters from Stephen Spencer.

In a truly remarkable twist, *Gun...* actually deserved all the attention, the best first novel this critic has read since Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*, a vastly different but equally stylish book. (Oddly enough, Lethem and Tartt were both members of the same loosely aligned literary cohort at Bennington, that infamous post-'80s pickling vat for young authors.) *Gun* was a giddily elegant trope on '50s sci-fi and film noir, the sort of novel that begs a film that begs a voice-over narration so as not to lose a single eerie or hilarious sentence. Not surprisingly, reviews were rampant with comparisons to Philip K. Dick. But Lethem is a better stylist than Dick. He also has the unjust advantage of living at the butt-end of this played-out century, with all the glowing detritus of international pop culture to sift through. Dick's stock-in-trade was paranoia, but Lethem is of a generation that already has exhausted paranoia (except as an emotion to excite in their elders' acid-ravaged nerves).

As a matter of fact, Lethem's new novel features a protagonist suffering from a form of narapioia: the fear of following someone—or something. Chaos (né Everett, né Moon), the young hero of *Amnesia Moon*, is stuck in one hell of a caucus race, driving across the dessicated American West in search of—

What? Uh, I'm not quite sure. *Amnesia Moon* is a difficult novel to review, because the entire book is a sort of puzzle that the reader puts together, page by page, and by revealing too much of its plot I stand to spoil the fun.

(Oh, go ahead.)

Well, OK—

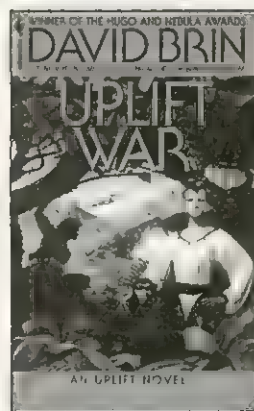
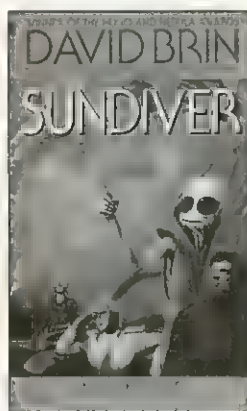
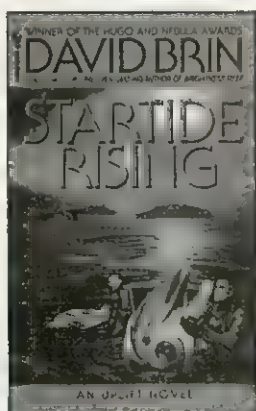
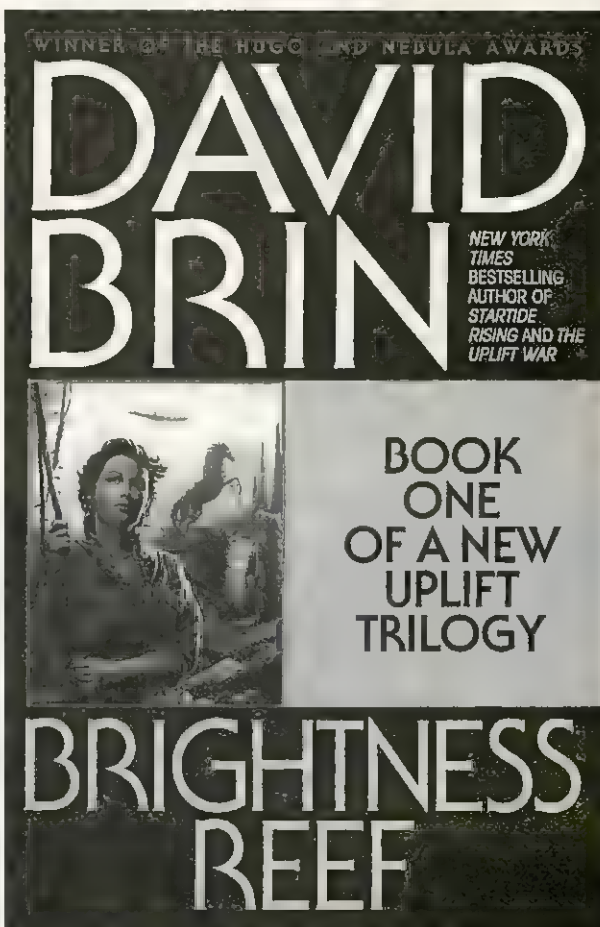
Sometime in the near future, a terrible disaster has swept the world—so terrible we never figure out exactly what it was. Earth's population has been decimated. America, and presumably the world, is even more fragmented than it is today. Those pockets of mid-



DAVID BRIN RETURNS!

BRIGHTNESS REEF Book One of a new Uplift Trilogy

David Brin, winner of the Hugo and Nebula Awards for Best Novel, returns to the universe of *Sundiver*, *Startide Rising* and *The Uplift War* in this long-awaited new novel. The first of a new trilogy, *Brightness Reef* takes us to the world of Jijo, long since abandoned by the advanced Buyer civilization in order to restore the planet's shattered ecological balance. Now Jijo has been illegally colonized by six different species who live in peace—aside from their fear of being caught and punished for their crime. But when a strange starship appears over Jijo, it seems their worst fears are about to be realized.



dle class normalcy that remain have become stunningly weird in their own refusal to acknowledge what has happened, whatever the hell it was. Because not only has the Earth been environmentally damaged in some strange way, all of mankind appears to be suffering from varying forms of cognitive dissidence. People remember some kind of disaster. But there's no agreement on what it was.

Basically a lot of the old connections between things fell away, which gave people a chance to make up new ones. But the new ones don't always stick. That's my version of it, anyway. Other versions include scenarios of alien invasion, monstrous ecological damage, a town that resembles a cross between the conformist hell of Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time* and Alice's mad tea party. There are nods to *Neuromancer* and Raymond Chandler, and about a million pop culture references.

The journey of the aptly named Chaos takes him from Hatfork, Wyoming, to San Francisco, and there and back again in the company of a fur-covered mutant named Melinda. Along the way he meets numerous characters as traumatized as himself, with this in common: No matter where Chaos goes, other people dream his dreams, which may or may not be actual memories of the way life once was. As one character explains, there is now *A gestalt urge for coherence, after the rupture... When the change occurred, the human need for order suffered*

a terrible blow. This great need resulted in the widening of a channel, a compensatory receptivity to dreams.

If this all sounds confusing, it is, but only a little. Lethem is too skillful to let his readers be overwhelmed by the mysteries of his clever plot. In most ways, *Amnesia Moon* is that American classic, a picaresque road novel. The road just isn't in very good shape anymore.

Chaos steals cars (gas-fueled and solar) like a post-holocaust Dean Moriarty. He sleeps with several women, virtual and actual, and hobnobs with a host of oddballs whose names reflect their cultural parentage: Kellogg, Harriman, Ray and Dave, Eddie, Billy Fault, Dawn Crash, Ilford, Cale. Readers sifting through the wreckage will find fragments of classic SF from the New Wave era: bits of *Dhalgren*, *Desolation Alley*, J.G. Ballard, "A Boy and His Dog," as well as stray compass points indicating places as disparate as Oz and Twin Peaks.

Amnesia Moon manages to cram most of twentieth century America into a few hundred pages—just the right amount, since a longer book might have been wearying. By novel's end, both Chaos and the reader have a better idea of what's going on in Lethem's psychologically fragile world, but there are enough questions (for me, at least) and enough fine prose to warrant a second reading. Ultimately, *Amnesia Moon* is more puzzling than dazzling, but that's OK. As Chaos' reconstituted

friend Cale says, "Don't worry about it. It's like a jump cut in a movie. Everyone is missing something." Happily, the show is good enough to sit through a few more times.

Elizabeth Hand

RECENT AND RECOMMENDED

By writing such classic works of science fiction as *The Female Man*, *The Two of Them*, and the revolutionary non-fiction work *How to Suppress Women's Writing*, Joanna Russ has staked out her corner as the feminist conscience of SF. With the publication of *To Write Like A Woman: Essays in Feminism and Science Fiction* (Indiana University Press, trade paperback, 184 pages) she continues to prove herself one of the best critical minds in the field. She has won the Pilgrim Award, given by the Science Fiction Research Association, for her body of work. In this volume she once more attacks the hows and whys of SF, examining the underlying preconceptions, misapprehensions and biases that have attached themselves to the genre. Whether she is examining sexism in SF (as in *A Boy and His Dog*: "The Final Solution"), or the critical tools we need to understand SF (*Towards an Aesthetic of Science Fiction*), Russ is always careful to communicate instead of obfuscate. In her opening essay, Russ writes: "Is science fiction literature? Yes. Can it be judged by the usual literary criteria? No." It is well worth following Russ through the pages of this volume to find out why. □

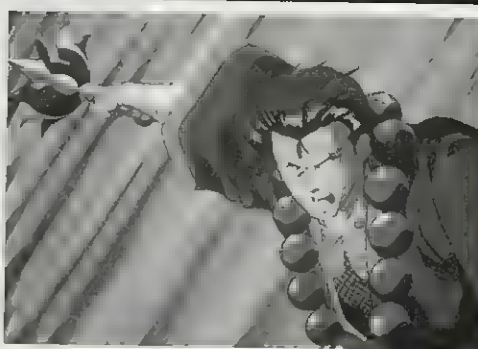
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By Dan Perez

The X-Files producers declare interstellar war with *Space: Above and Beyond*.



In the year 2063, the Marine Corps is still looking for a few good fighter pilots.

STILL IN SEARCH OF A SHOW THAT CAN SURVIVE the deadly Sunday time slot of 7-8 p.m. ET (opposite CBS powerhouse *60 Minutes*), Fox Broadcasting Company will unleash a full-blown interstellar war in the form of *Space: Above and Beyond*. The two-hour pilot, which debuts September 24, was written by longtime collaborators James Wong and Glen Morgan, who also serve as executive producers for the show. Wong and Morgan previously worked as co-executive producers on Fox's runaway hit *The X-Files*.

Space: Above and Beyond's premise is a staple of SF literature: after years of universal peace, the human race is colonizing other planets. In the year 2063, they encounter a race of aliens who wipe out two human colonies, along with Earth's top fighter squadrons. Now it's up to a squadron of first-year Marine Corps fighter pilots to aid in the fight to deter the alien menace.

The series had a tumultuous history at Fox. Its conception was two years ago, while Wong and Morgan were still working on *The X-Files*. "At that time," Wong notes, "the head of Fox was Lucie Salhany, and she wanted to do *Star Fleet Academy*, because she was instrumental in getting [*Star Trek: The Next Generation*] on. And we thought, 'we don't want to do *Star Fleet Academy*—that's *Star Trek*!' We felt that the audience wouldn't stand for a rip-off like that. So we came up with an idea, and wrote the pilot. This was a one-hour pilot at this point. Then Lucie left the studio, so the project went to [her replacement, Sandy Grushow]. To make a long story short, he was fired. Then it became a movie of the week, and the movie of the week guy was fired, and finally it ended up with John Matoian. During the movie of the week time, it became a two-hour show...kind of a back-door pilot.

"By this time, it was the fourth or fifth time we'd rewritten the show, and finally we got the go-ahead to make it as a regular pilot, and we did, and that's the whole, sad story," Wong concludes with a laugh.

Wong is quick to credit Peter Roth, president of production with Twentieth Century Television, for helping keep the show alive through the months of corporate shuffling. "It was frustrating," Wong says of the process, "because the chain of command kept moving on, so you had new people to convince each time that this was a worthwhile project. Peter Roth at Twentieth Century never let go: he was tenacious—he was instrumental in getting this show on the air."

From their work on *The X-Files* and earlier shows like *21 Jump Street*, Wong and Morgan had honed their skills at writing and producing shows in which characters were the principal element. "What *Space* is really about," Wong says, "is that we wanted to do a World War II movie set in the future. If you look at the genre of war movies, you see the different kind of storytelling it encompasses. Basically, we want to follow the grunts in battle. We follow three main characters, Nathan, Shane, and Cooper—the show is really about what war puts them through. What does courage mean? What does fear mean? How do you face death? How do you deal with this crucible of emotions that are boiling because you're in hairy situations all the time? It's science fiction in that it's set in the future and there's a lot fun, neat stuff, but really it's about the people, the characters. There's a lot of action—it's an action show—but nonetheless, I believe that the stories and the characters are interesting enough that you'll want to see where they're heading and how they deal with the situations."

"Just look at all the cop shows on the air. What's the difference [between them] except that the characters are different? For us, we started from there. Even though we knew that this was the genre we wanted to do, and there was the excitement of what a war movie might be, we started from the characters."

Space: Above and Beyond continues another trend for the writer/producer duo, in that its cast is nearly all new faces. "If you look at the shows we've worked on before," says Wong, "like *21 Jump Street*, for instance—we weren't on that show in the very beginning, but that's an example of how that can work. Johnny and Peter and Dustin and Holly were unknowns, and Johnny's a big movie star now. Even look at Richard Grieco when he became Booker on *Jump Street*—it all depends on if they're the right people. If you've got the right people I don't think you need a name to help your show.

Wong and Morgan made a deliberate effort to avoid treading on ground that had already been covered by shows like *Star Trek* and *Babylon 5*. "That's one reason why when Lucie suggested *Star Fleet Academy*, we immediately said, 'What's the opposite of that? If *Star Trek* does this, what can we do? If *Babylon 5* does this, what can we do differently?' In every decision we made, it was natural for us to go away from the other shows."

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Once the show got a green light at Fox, pre-production caught Wong and Morgan while they were still working on *The X-Files*. "At one point," Wong recalls, "we were writing a feature for TriStar, doing *The X-Files*, and prepping the pilot at the same time. We were exhausted, and at the same time, kind of confused. I think it all worked out fine. Chris Carter [*X-Files* creator and co-executive producer] gave us a lot of support along the way. When we finished our last *X-Files*, we didn't have just a sense of relief—we started missing doing that show immediately. It was such

a fun show, and we loved the people who worked on it. Even though it was a big burden that was lifted off our shoulders, we really had a sense of losing something great. It was bittersweet leaving *X-Files*."

Production of the \$6 million pilot began on Australia's Gold Coast and lasted for two-and-a-half months before it moved to Los Angeles. "Australia was a dream," Wong says. "There are several reasons we're not shooting in Australia now. It's so far away, it makes communication almost impossible. If we were to have writing staff here, and shoot

there, the logistics of it would just be impossible. Second, I think that though their crews are great, the post-production facilities weren't up to speed—not that they can't do things, but they just didn't have enough machines, enough technicians to service us."

Each episode of *Space: Above and Beyond* will cost between \$1-2 million, with special computer-generated visual effects provided by Area 51, a new L.A. effects house. "If you look at our show," says Wong of the CGI effects, "you'll see that they've done an incredible job. I think it's some of the most spectacular work I've seen. At first, when we started this project, we thought, 'We want to build models,' because we wanted to basically get the gritty look vs. the kind of polished video look that computer-generated stuff has. But we talked to [Area 51's] Tim McHugh, and he said, 'Look, it doesn't matter if you build it as a model or in the computer—if you light it right, give it the right colors and textures, it's going to look great.'

"If you want to have 20 spaceships, you'd have to shoot a single model 20 times and composite all that or you'd need to build a lot more models. In the computer, once you build one great ship, you can duplicate that great ship, and add different detailing on the other ships. We weren't convinced of the look until he showed us what he could do. We saw it and it just looks great—it matches with the film and doesn't look like a video special effect."

Continued on page 104

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The Real Jurassic Park: Jeff Goldblum, star of Spielberg's top-grossing epic, narrates a documentary that poses the question: Could scientists create a living dinosaur from 100 million-year-old DNA?

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Optimus Design Systems	Buffalo	NY	Comic Store	Lancaster	PA
T & C Cards	Canandaigua	NY	Phantom of the Attic	Monroeville	PA
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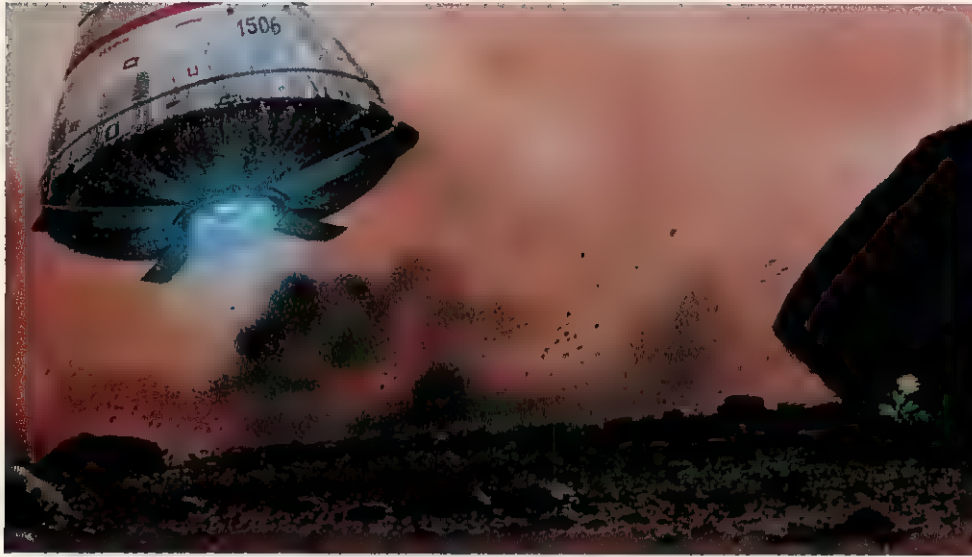
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CONQUERING THE UNIVERSE THESE DAYS, WHEN we bother to do it at all, occurs one body at a time, as each astronaut dons his or her own bulky spacesuit. In the future, however, spacesuits may become passe, as we use our scientific knowledge to terraform alien worlds—that is, to change other planets into newly minted replicas of our own Earth. The following scientists/SF writers recently met to discuss this sometimes controversial issue.

Steven Gillett is a research associate at the University of Nevada's Mackay School of Mines in Reno. He holds a Ph.D in geology and has written extensively on planetary science topics, including terraforming and lunar resources, for both popular and technical journals. Geoffrey A. Landis was a participant, along with others such as K. Eric Drexler, in the MIT seminar on space colonization in 1975, and has since contributed numerous papers to scientific literature on the subject. Dr. Robert Zubrin is a staff engineer at Lockheed Martin Aeronautics in Denver, employed in the design of advanced interplanetary missions. Widely known as the designer of the "Mars Direct" mission plan, which could get humans to the Red Planet within ten years, Zubrin has also done extensive work analyzing the prospects for colonizing and terraforming Mars.

SF AGE: At one time, when we spoke of visiting other planets, we meant bringing our environments with us in our space suits. Now we are talking of grander schemes, of actually changing the environments of other planets to suit us. How likely is this, and how would it occur?

GILLETT: Well, actually, the originally semi-serious notions go back to the '60s, with the first reasonably good data, and I think the story since has been that it's not nearly so easy as it seemed.

ZUBRIN: It's the way it's always been done. It's how

we've colonized the Earth.

SF AGE: How *have* we terraformed Earth, then?

GILLETT: Well, on a global scale it's hardly been "terraforming," so far! But certainly more local changes in human environments go back a long ways.

ZUBRIN: Well, first micro-algae terraformed the Earth by putting oxygen in its atmosphere, then land plants created the soil on land, then successive waves of plants and animals created habitable areas farther inland.

GILLETT: Bob, but that's not "we!"

ZUBRIN: Then humans drained swamps, planted crops, decided what animals would be allowed to breed, and so forth. The United States today certainly does not resemble North America in the year 1700.

SF AGE: So when did scientists first contemplate this as a way of moving outward to the stars?

GILLETT: Carl Sagan's paper (circa 1961) was the first semi-serious suggestion, as far as I know.

ZUBRIN: Jack Williamson before that. I think Sagan was using algae to put oxygen on Venus.

GILLETT: Sagan first suggested injecting cyanobacteria ("blue green algae") into Venus' atmosphere. That won't work, for a number of reasons.

LANDIS: We now know Sagan's suggestion is a bit naive. Venus is a tough problem!

GILLETT: He was assuming a considerably less massive atmosphere than we now know exists. And also more water present!

ZUBRIN: The most realistic prospects for terraforming now are for Mars.

LANDIS: I'm not yet convinced that Mars is the easiest prospect.

GILLETT: Like Venus, it's not as easy as it once seemed.

SF AGE: What would be required to terraform Mars?

LANDIS: There are two schools of philosophy for how to terraform Mars. There are the "gentle" terraformers, who want to gradually change Mars by a slow greenhouse warming. And there are the "cataclysmic" terraformers, who want to do it by radical means, such as impacting comets into Mars to input volatiles into the atmosphere.

ZUBRIN: It's by far the easiest prospect. It has oceans of water and a solar flux that is within the limits of parts of Earth's biosphere. The first thing that's needed is to get the pressure up.

GILLETT: We don't *know* it has oceans of water! A great deal has probably been photodissociated away!

ZUBRIN: I refer you, Steve, to Donohue's recent paper in *Nature*. There is little doubt of several hundred meters of water present on Mars, frozen into the soil and below

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it in a liquid water table.

GILLETT: I'll look at the paper, but we have a saying in the Earth sciences about "ground truth."

ZUBRIN: There's a sizable portion of a bar of carbon dioxide adsorbed in the soil, i.e., not chemically bound. This can be gotten out by warming the planet with greenhouse gases.

GILLETT: We don't know that!

LANDIS: The hope is, if you warm Mars just a *little*, that it starts evolving more carbon dioxide out of the soil, the higher temperature then evaporates water out of the postulated layer of permafrost, and we get a runaway greenhouse effect. And then we can start a biosphere.

GILLETT: The key word is "hope."

ZUBRIN: No, it's not just hope. The behavior of carbon dioxide is that it adsorbs strongly in minerals at Mars' current ambient temperatures. If there are 7 millibars in the atmosphere, it means there are many more in the soil.

GILLETT: Where's the data on that?

ZUBRIN: Try exposing zeolite to carbon dioxide and watch what happens!

GILLETT: How do you know there are zeolites? They aren't common minerals; they take special conditions to form—typically devitrifying volcanic ash.

ZUBRIN: Anyway, if you set up enough factories on Mars to produce greenhouse gases, you can warm the place, but that would probably take fifty years.

LANDIS: Only fifty years? I'd have thought much longer.

GILLETT: What's the ballpark if you absorb *all* insolation? That would put some limits. Zeolites also typically require *liquid* H₂O, because of the way the silica gels polymerize.

ZUBRIN: I recently, however, read a much cuter idea by Alan Mole that would allow us to terraform Mars now. It might not work, but it might.

LANDIS: Really? What is it?

ZUBRIN: He wants to drop a few—like three or four—hydrogen bombs near, but not on, the south polar cap. The idea is to blow dust onto the pole and change its albedo. Just like the Mount St. Helens blast.

LANDIS: On the poles? Is that useful? Dust gets on the poles anyway, during dust storms.

ZUBRIN: Yes, it would cause the southern polar carbon dioxide reservoir to vaporize, increasing the planet's pressure to 30 millibars or so. That in itself would be a significant feat of planetary engineering, given that we can do it with so little effort.

LANDIS: Hmmm. Really? The sun angle is awfully low.

GILLETT: How come this hasn't happened naturally in the last three billion years or so?

ZUBRIN: But if the polar carbon dioxide is enough to raise the temperature enough to

...we have been
ignoring the
easiest body to
terraform: the
Moon.

outgas regolith carbon dioxide, you could get a runaway greenhouse effect, warming the planet and pressurizing it at the same time.

LANDIS: I don't know, Bob. Mars is subject to global dust storms, especially the southern hemisphere. If dropping a bit of dust onto the south polar

cap would stimulate a runaway greenhouse effect, it would have happened. Long ago. Many times.

ZUBRIN: Geoff, I brought that issue up, too. But the answer is that you sustain the bombing, i.e., dusting of the poles for about a decade. That's not done by the dust storms.

LANDIS: Maybe.

GILLETT: Need ground truth, again!

ZUBRIN: Steve, I have nothing against ground truth measurements. In fact, as you know, I am very much in favor of both robotic and human missions to quantify the problem.

GILLETT: OK, but we have to be a bit careful about the "castles in the sky" first. It's entirely probable that lots of Mars' carbon dioxide inventory is now in carbonates. If you had a warm, wet, early Mars, you would have gotten carbonates automatically.

ZUBRIN: Steve, it can't all be in carbonates, because once the planet dropped below zero centigrade, the water cycle stopped.

GILLETT: Not necessarily. We don't know *anything* about the kinetics of carbonate formation over the timescales we're talking here.

ZUBRIN: But the fact is, if there is carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, there has to be much more in the soil. It's like a solubility problem. There are laws of chemistry operating here.

GILLETT: Yes, the laws of chemistry operate, but 'til we know the species present they're not much of a constraint!

LANDIS: How *much* more, though? A few millibars? A bar?

ZUBRIN: A few hundred millibars is probable.

LANDIS: Earth's atmospheric pressure is one bar, so you're talking ten, twenty percent of that.

GILLETT: Again, it depends on the species being adsorbed on here, which we have very little info about. And in fact, the present pressure is buffered by the solid carbon dioxide in the caps, as was proposed back in the '70s—I think.

LANDIS: Well, water and carbon dioxide. Will a few hundred millibars of carbon dioxide do enough?

ZUBRIN: Furthermore, all the early CO₂ can't have gone into carbonate, because if you look at the problem from the point of view of an early Mars with a thick carbon dioxide atmosphere thinning out via carbonate formation, it's impossible for the reservoir of free carbon dioxide to drop below a few hundred millibars, because after that, car-

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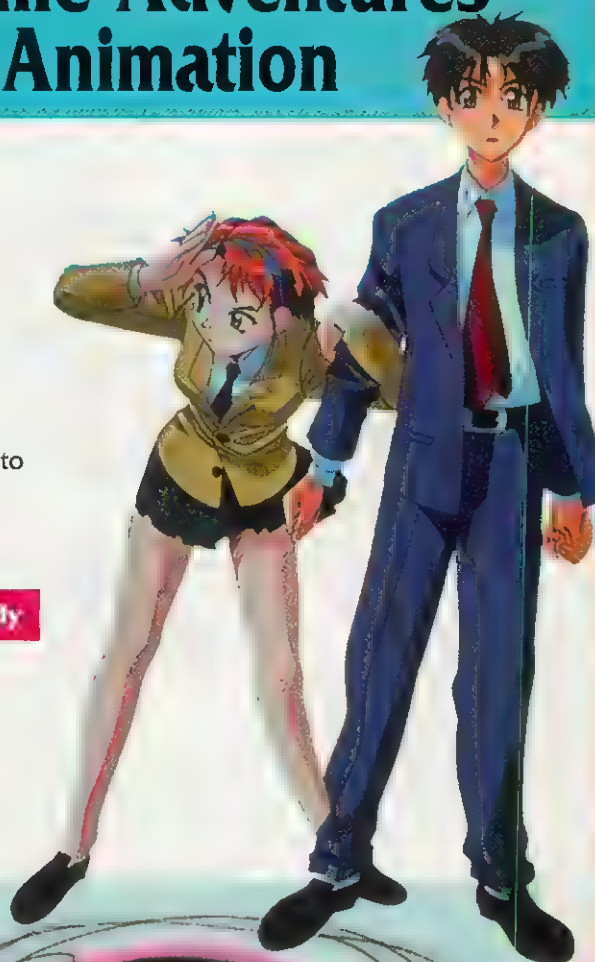
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bonate formation stops. So it's there, guys, that's all there is to it. The question is how to get it out.

GILLET: Again, we know essentially *nothing* about the kinetics of carbonate formation over those timescales. And that is *not* all there is to it! Furthermore, you are likely to have local perturbations (e.g., eruptions) that can make carbonate formation briefly *much* more favorable. Carbonates are much easier to nucleate than zeolites.

ZUBRIN: It's not a question of *if* we can do it, it's a question of how *hard* it will be to do. Now, if you look at the problem from the point of view of humanity's exponentially rising technological capabilities and use of power, there is no doubt it can and will be done, and no longer than 150 years from now.

GILLET: If you have to use calcium carbonate to make carbon dioxide, it won't be easy.

SF AGE: We've touched on Mars and Venus here—are there any other planets the terraforming of which has been seriously discussed?

LANDIS: Yes. I personally think that we have been ignoring the easiest body to terraform: the Moon.

GILLET: But why? It's more valuable as it is, to a twenty-first century spacefaring culture!

LANDIS: It has one great advantage—it's already at about the right distance from the sun to keep it at a temperate climate.

ZUBRIN: Its rotation rate is all screwed up. Unlike Mars, which has a twenty-four hour day.

LANDIS: Once we colonize the Moon, the asteroids will be much more valuable as resources.

GILLET: Not necessarily.

LANDIS: The Moon, though, would be very convenient as living area.

GILLET: Why?

LANDIS: All it needs is atmosphere.

ZUBRIN: The Moon has no water, carbon, or nitrogen. Everything has to be imported. It's a much harder target for colonization or terraforming than Mars.

GILLET: I agree with the first part, Bob!

SF AGE: How would we get an atmosphere there, Geoff?

LANDIS: Water, carbon, and nitrogen are abundant in comets.

GILLET: And in the outer system...

LANDIS: There are *billions* of comets surrounding the solar system. Ultimately, of course, we will live on the comets themselves, but there are enough to spare a few! If you put an atmosphere on the Moon, it will last for thousands of years. And the great thing is, the air that leaks away just leaks into orbit, where it eventually gets swept back onto the Moon. So the *real* time scale that an atmosphere would last on the Moon is tens of thousands of years.

GILLET: Geoff—Is that true? I would expect a much higher loss rate because of very effective heating of isolated molecules as close in as Earth orbit. Just takes a little UV.



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LANDIS: Only the outermost layer gets the UV; the rest is shielded.

GILLET: Not for molecules that have left the Moon!

LANDIS: But, in general, a molecule that leaves has a good chance of being swept up again later, as the Moon orbits round.

GILLET: It would be relatively easy to put some limits on that; has that been done?

ZUBRIN: Martin Fogg is publishing a book on terraforming, due to be out soon.

GILLET: From (of all people) the Society of Automotive Engineers.

ZUBRIN: Geoff, sending comets in to crash on the Moon poses a significant range safety hazard. Actually, terraforming is interesting in another respect. It will give us spin-offs that will get us to the stars. While only minimal twenty-first century-type means are necessary to put a carbon dioxide atmosphere on Mars, creating an oxygen atmosphere there will require extraordinary expenditures of energy. The development of a truly large scale means of energy production—many terrawatts—are the same

The idea that humans have no right to transform nature is a primitive pagan notion shown to be stupid by the extinction of those societies which believed it.

sorts of energy sources required to drive starships.

GILLET: Selective dissociation by the right wavelength tends to leave the fragments with lots of energy. Turns out it's probably the main mechanism for loss of nitrogen on Mars. Can't give you the exact paper, though.

LANDIS: Loss of nitrogen? Nitrogen has an awful high binding energy.

GILLET: Exactly the problem! Mars nonetheless seems to be depleted.

ZUBRIN: Will you guys get off the Moon? It's boring.

GILLET: *De gustibus non est...*

SF AGE: Back when Geoff mentioned terraforming the Moon, someone reacted with horror and said that it should be left the way it is.

GILLET: Not "horror" exactly. I just think it may be more useful the way it is, granted a spacefaring civilization. I think the Moon is likely to be much more valuable as an industrial park. Vacuum is useful stuff. Working in an O₂-H₂O environment is *hard*. We just happen to be used to it.

SF AGE: So is there a moral issue to this at all? Assuming that we could do this... *should* we do this? For example, are we obligated to leave Mars as Mars?

ZUBRIN: We haven't left Earth as Earth, and we wouldn't be alive today if we had. It's our right and necessity to terraform planets.

GILLET: People have discussed it some. I like to point out that utterly dead worlds are beyond our experience. When we change Earth, we necessarily affect other living things. Not so elsewhere.

ZUBRIN: The idea that humans have no right to transform nature is a primitive pagan notion shown to be stupid by the extinction of those societies which believed it.

LANDIS: But nevertheless, people *do* object to transforming nature. The debate between the people who want to keep Mars pristine (the "reds"), and those who want to terraform Mars (the "greens") is a central issue to Kim Stanley Robinson's *Green Mars*. And the debate will only get more intense as we begin to move from ivory tower to Mars. That's *one* ethical system, Bob, not necessarily the only one.

ZUBRIN: The validity of an ethical notion is open to proof or disproof by whether it contributes to human survival. On the basis of that test, non-interference with nature is a false and stupid idea. It guarantees species extinction.

LANDIS: I, myself, am quite in favor of terraforming, but I can guarantee you that there

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will be others quite vehemently opposed.

SF AGE: On the other hand, I would say that ethics and survival are two different things, and that ethics is not a survival trait. This is regardless of whether you are right regarding our right to terraform.

GILLETT: I like to point out that terraforming involves extending *life* in general, not just humanity. One can turn that idea around and say *that's* the duty, not a naive one of "hands-off." I like to think of terraforming as making a self-maintaining biosphere, independent of technological maintenance. It gives life a new start in any event.

ZUBRIN: No, ethics can be proven or disproven the same as any scientific theory. You know a scientific theory is correct because the people who base their actions on that world view succeed. You know another scientific theory is nothing but religious ideology because the people who believe in it cannot manipulate nature and so they die.

SF AGE: Let's go on about that "when?" Have you figured out a date? How far off is it that it will be possible?

LANDIS: That's another advantage in starting with the Moon. We can pretty much absolutely guarantee that the Moon absolutely, positively has no indigenous life that will be affected by our actions.

ZUBRIN: We can have humans on Mars in ten years. We can have CFC factories on Mars in thirty years. From there it will take about

thirty years to put enough CFCs in the atmosphere to cause significant carbon dioxide outgassing and pressure rise. That's sixty years.

GILLETT: Again, I won't bet the ranch on the outgassing scenario...

Pre-Apollo, we *knew* that there was subsurface water on the Moon, too.

LANDIS: Terraforming the Moon would take longer than that; it takes time to move comets, since their orbital periods are so long.

ZUBRIN: Of course, if Mole's technique works, we can drastically alter Mars in less than twenty years.

SF AGE: Who would be in charge of this? NASA? Or some new organization?

GILLETT: Depends on how expensive it is.

ZUBRIN: Or like building Levittown.

LANDIS: My guess is either the Dutch, or the Mormon Church. They have experience with terraforming. It's a long-term project—it could be like building cathedrals—a religious imperative.

GILLETT: A question of timescales, obviously! And of demand.

LANDIS: Yes, a question of timescales. Levittown was built in a year or so, and the people who financed it reaped the benefits. Cathedrals were built over decades, or centuries, and the people who built them never used them.

GILLETT: If lebensraum is the issue, why wouldn't we do space colonies instead? Cheaper and faster, and not so politically charged.

ZUBRIN: Actually, I think that Mars will be colonized in the twenty-first century by refugees—you can see that the Earth is quite capable of producing them. Once colonists live there, they will want to terraform it.

LANDIS: Maybe. If they live there, on the other hand, they may get used to the way it is.

GILLETT: I've proposed a self-replicating scenario for petrifying Venus's atmosphere, but that's very long-term!

LANDIS: Terraforming could be disruptive.

ZUBRIN: People on an unterraformed Mars will benefit greatly by terraforming it. That's obvious.

GILLETT: No, it's not. Depends on their structures, where and how they're living, etc.

LANDIS: Your terraforming schemes do seem a bit more gentle than some. But if they don't work, we may need to go to comet impacts after all.

GILLETT: Would *you* like your foundation to melt underneath you? Suppose you already have a settlement where the sea is going to be?

ZUBRIN: A new house is a small price to pay for a breathable atmosphere.

GILLETT: If someone else is paying for it! I think Bob's scenario depends on a lot of "ifs"—but at least the data needed could be gotten reasonably cheap first.

LANDIS: I think *we can* do it. It may be harder than Bob suggests, but it can be done. But *will* we do it? I don't know. I hope we will.

ZUBRIN: We'll do it. We'd be less than human if we don't. □

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Owings Mills, Maryland – The National Library of Poetry has just announced that \$24,000 in prizes will be awarded over the next 12 months in the North American Open Amateur Poetry Contest. The contest is open to everyone and entry is free.

"We're especially looking for poems from new or unpublished poets," indicated Howard Ely, spokesperson for The National Library of Poetry, "we have a ten year history of awarding large prizes to talented poets who have never before won any type of writing competition."

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Anyone may enter the competition simply by sending in one original poem,

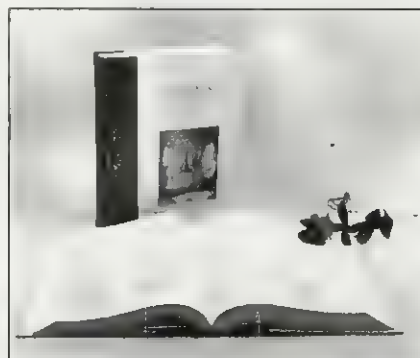
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The poem should be no more than 20 lines, and the poet's name and address must appear on the top of the page. "Each poem received will be acknowledged, usually within seven weeks," indicated Mr. Ely. Every poet who enters will receive an evaluation of their artistry by the judges.

Possible Publication

Many submitted poems will also be considered for inclusion in one of The



The Coming of Dawn is one of The National Library of Poetry's recent hardbound anthologies.

National Library of Poetry's forthcoming hardbound anthologies. Anthologies published by the organization have included, *On the Threshold of a Dream*, *Days of Future's Past*, *Of Diamonds and Rust*, and *Moments More to Go*, among others.

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There's nothing funny about mixing humor and SF.



The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy is perhaps the most popular of all the humorous SF hybrids.

IF I SLIP ON A BANANA PEEL, THAT'S TRAGEDY.
If you slip on a banana peel, that's comedy.
If an alien slips on a banana peel, that's foreplay.
Humor in science fiction is everyone's mythical teenage son: A lot of people are firmly convinced that it never works, others contend that it works poorly, still others are markedly surprised that it works at all. For all that, those who love it assert that it works just fine (under the right conditions), and that it even does what it's supposed to do.

Let's shelve the SF aspect for a minute and take a closer look at the FS (Funny Stuff) solo. Humor itself has been a hinky little thorn in the side of dour-faced literary analysts for centuries. It sidesteps classification, dissection, and plain explanation as slick as a Simonized weasel. In its way, it's a panda: Some say it's cousin to the raccoon, some say to the bear. Try as they may, Freud and Bergson and that lot can't quite manage to ear-tag the beast. On the other hand, it seems to have no trouble breeding in captivity.

Now add to the already inexplicable subject of FS the accoutrements of SF and you've got a panda wearing a Darth Vader helmet. No, wait, that's Marilyn Quayle; easy to confuse the two of them at this distance.

So all right, how does humor in SF work? Why was something like *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Universe* so successful? (By the way, I am not going to offer examples of unsuccessful SF humor. I'm sure that my Gentle Readers can themselves provide more than a few examples of works within the genre whose jokes fell flatter than a roadkill tribble. As part of my life plan to avoid a

similarly two-dimensional fate at the hands of disgruntled authors and fans of same, I'm not about to name names. You know who you are, and you ought to be ashamed of yourselves.)

Besides, who cares how many Venusians it takes to screw in a light bulb!

Much of what goes into successful SF humor is the same good stuff that goes into successful mundane humor, except for lutefish jokes.

1. Accessibility.

Humor isn't humor if nobody gets it. If a standup comic drops a punch line in the forest and no one listening to him knows what a forest is, it ain't funny, Mac. Successful humor requires an audience and must contain material that is accessible to that audience. Funny stuff needs a familiar object to ridicule—no matter how lovingly or nastily—and this simply will not work if your audience hasn't a glimmer as to what the heck that object is or what it is supposed to do under ordinary circumstances.

Examples: Seinfeld bellyaching about snotty New York restaurants is not likely to get a laugh out of some guy who lives in the middle of the North Dakota prairies. On the other hand, the fact that Seinfeld himself resembles a groundhog will strike our doughty North Dakotan as funny, groundhogs being pretty universal in their risibility.

A computer that says "Oy vey!" is not going to be funny to an audience of Bedouin tribesmen who have precious little exposure to either computers or Yiddish.

Humor doesn't work if the explanation takes longer than the joke.

1A. Parody and Satire.

Parody and satire rely heavily on Accessibility. Parody is the cuckoo chick that assumes the trappings, style, diction, vocabulary, you-name-it of its host and then turns them against said host. Satire is parody with critical bite. The writer of parodies is generally just out to have a good time. The writer of satire is out to kick tailfin.

Success here again depends on audience familiarity with the original plot, character, or SF trope upon which the parody is based or which made the satire-writer mad. I could write a parody of Edgar Rice Burroughs' most famous work—a parody scrupulously faithful to all elements of the original, including the author's style—yet if my readers had never encountered any mention of the heroic ape-man, they would not appreciate it. They would just shake their heads and ask, "Who is 'Tarzan of the Hamsters' and why is a grown man stuck in a HabiTrail?"

1B. Topical Humor.

Topical humor is a fragile thing. It depends not only on Accessibility but on matters of the moment. Check out my earlier Marilyn Quayle reference. In fifty years, it may no longer cause so much as a twitch of the lip because no one save a few crabbed historians will remember who Marilyn Quayle was. (I am assuming our luck holds out.)

Topical humor relies on fresh, up-to-the-minute references. This may be why topical SF humor is so rare. How can we have up-to-the-minute references when we're

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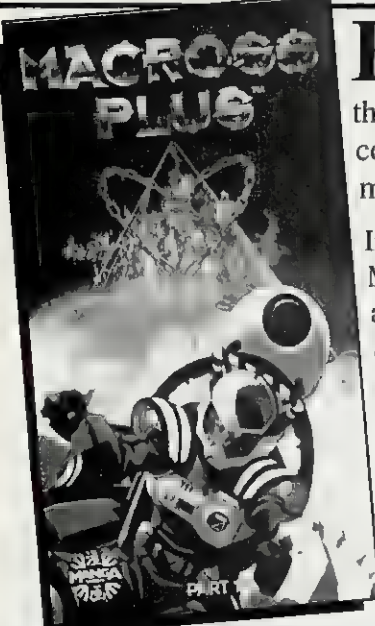
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writing about ahead-of-the-minute situations?

2. *The Upsetting of Expectations.*

It's a conspiracy, my brothers. Life, society, and previously ingested art have all been working together to set us up to recognize certain icons. Humor slaps a squirting plastic flower on the icon's lapel.

Thus when we are made to think of Granny, we picture a kindly, old, white-haired lady bearing cookies—never mind if our own granny hasn't picked up a chocolate chip since Hoover was a pup—and then along comes the humorist who takes a leather-clad, smart-talking old biddy and makes her more interested in sex than shortbread. And we laugh. We laugh because we didn't expect the old dear to be so voluble on the subject of impotence, especially in front of the kiddies on national TV. (Boy, we must be desperate.)

We live in the midst of icons, in SF as in life: The brave leader—be he barbarian swordsman or starship captain; the wise old wizard and/or man of science; the devastating dragon; the all-knowing computer/robot; the cute and cuddly alien critter...you get the idea. When we are presented with a specific character (Gilfang the Thief) belonging to a particular class of characters (Skillful-yet-Sympathetic Rogues) we expect him to behave like others of his stripe, at least as far as generalities go (Look out for Number One yet still manage to use his talents for the great and high-minded endeavor that is the central plot-point of the book. Or, if you prefer, help the hero kick the Dark Lord's butt all the way to Aldebaran and back.)

We are therefore prone to laugh when Gilfang announces that he has forgotten the secret way through the sewer pipes to the Dark Lord's rumpus room and someone above decks has just flushed. It wasn't what we expected. It wasn't what Gilfang expected either, but that's beside the point.

3. *The Bigger They Are.*

We all know that Stuff Happens. The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune are par for the course; it's those custard-pies-in-the-face of outrageous fortune that really knot our knickers. There is a world of difference, however, between being the pie's target and the un-pied witness. The witness gets to laugh. How loud the witness laughs is a scientifically derived formula which may be presented thus:

$$(q + v) L = V_p \times V_{si} + \Pi$$

That is to say, the *quantity* and *volume* of the audience's Laughter is in direct proportion to the Victim's position in life multiplied by the Victim's *self-image*. Plus pie.

If some poor nameless supernumerary gets the custard kiss, it is mildly droll (on the Better-Him-Than-Me scale). If the hero gets a faceful of frosting it's funnier, because one does not expect the hero to be made to look foolish (See #2.) The hero is likely the self-effacing sort who will gallantly wipe off the blueberries and share the chuckle. The hero can take a joke at his own expense because he is, after all, *the hero*, and being a good

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On the other hand, if the All Powerful and Omnipotent Ruler of the Universe gets pastry in the puss, you can bet it will bring down the house. First, because it's a sure bet that the A.P.O.R.U. has finished a long, smug speech about how he need fear no one and nothing—just one beat before the pie gets him. Second, because it's another sure thing that he's dressed much nicer than any other character; ergo, the pie is doing a more thorough job of bringing the overdressed snob down to the common level. Third, because the A.P.O.R.U. is in a position of power over the other characters analogous to that held by the bosses/supervisors/spousal units/relatives over the individual members of the Audience. We may never get to slap Uncle "When 'ya gonna get a *real* job, ya bum?" Emory full in the face with a runny peach cobbler, but we can dream, can't we?

4. *Doodoo and Woowoo.*

Sorry, there's no way you can deconstruct this. Ever since the day we were taught that there was something naughty, nasty, or just indelicate about certain bodily functions, we found the whole situation cause for the giggles. Especially when we discovered how upset we could make Mommy by saying the words for these things right out loud, in public, preferably while the minister was visiting.

Add to this the element of the Alien and you can make nine out of ten members of your audience laugh. (The ten still watching *Seinfeld*.) You see, there is Us and there is Them, and in a response that probably goes all the way back to *Homo Habilis*, we have been programmed to think of Our attitudes and customs as the only right ones while Theirs, being different, are wrong and therefore a fair target for derision.

(I mean, do you realize that in some countries it's considered *polite* to belch after every meal? Isn't that the funniest thing you ever heard? No, Mavis, Newark doesn't count as a country.)

When one of Us comes up against one of Them, the culture clash can be played for laughs, and it can be played from either side of the net, Our point of view or Theirs. This is particularly true when the author brings up *How We Do It* versus *How They Do It* (and you know darn well what I mean by "It!" Stop sniggering. Grow up. I *mean* it!).

Another reason this kind of humor works is that when we get good and nervous, we laugh, and nothing makes some people more nervous than sex and shall-we-go-powder-our-tentacles-P'torf?

5. *Wordplay.*

Puns. I think that about sums it up. Although I would like to go on record as saying that—contrary to popular belief—puns do not give you leprosy. Some people just want you to *feel* that way. They hope it will make you stop. They are wrong. Heaven knows, it hasn't stopped *me*.

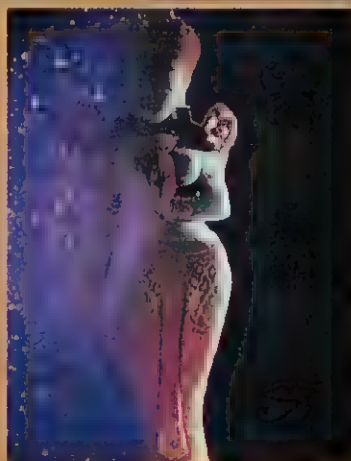
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SUBJECT: JAMES EARL RAY; AKA; ALIASES; FUGITIVE;
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NEW YORK OFFICE HAS BEEN ADVISED THAT AN INDIVIDUAL IDENTIFYING HIMSELF AS "JIMMYE L. GIBSON," TELEPHONED THE NEW YORK OFFICE AND STATED THAT HE HAD INFORMATION CONCERNING THE WHEREABOUTS OF JAMES EARL RAY. THE INDIVIDUAL STATED THAT HE HAD BEEN IN CONTACT WITH RAY SINCE HIS ESCAPE FROM PRISON IN MISSISSIPPI IN JANUARY, SIXTYSEVEN. THE INDIVIDUAL STATED THAT HE HAD BEEN IN CONTACT WITH RAY SINCE HIS ESCAPE FROM PRISON IN MISSISSIPPI IN JANUARY, SIXTYSEVEN. THE INDIVIDUAL STATED THAT HE HAD BEEN IN CONTACT WITH RAY SINCE HIS ESCAPE FROM PRISON IN MISSISSIPPI IN JANUARY, SIXTYSEVEN.

END PAGE TWO



Will Vossoff and Nimmitz rescue an ancient civilization from complete destruction? Will they earn a planet's riches as their reward? Well...yes and no. After all, these *are* Vossoff and Nimmitz.

IT TOOK LESS THAN TWENTY minutes for their ship's medical diagnostic program to confirm that neither Vossoff nor Nimmitz had suffered more than his usual amount of serious brain damage recently; they weren't seeing things; the solar system up ahead really was under attack by a giant pink bunny.

It wouldn't be precisely accurate to declare this the very last thing they'd ever expected to encounter, since the sight appeared nowhere on their list of expectations, not even in last place. And yet, there one was, nibbling at one small uninhabited planet it held between its paws, and reducing another to superheated plasma with disintegration beams fired from its twitching pink nose.

Vossoff did a more thorough scan and found out that the planet-devouring bunny was in fact an alien warship, built in this shape for reasons that both men assumed must have made some

JUST A COUPLE OF SPACE ROGUES PLAYING “NAME THAT TUNE”

BY ADAM-TROY CASTRO

Illustration by Joel Naprstek

kind of sense to somebody at the time. Moreover, this particular solar system possessed a wealthy civilized world, Glorvia IV, which was frantically broadcasting distress signals on every known band as the remarkably cute dreadnought continued to nibble everything in its path. The ship's Brain projections of the warship's progress revealed that without help Glorvia would be rabbit chow in just under six hours.

Vossoff twirled the tip of his walrus moustache as he watched the destruction unfold. "Interesting, wouldn't you say, eh, Karl? Just when you think the universe is getting dull, it exerts itself and restores your faith in its infinite variety."

Nimmitz was less thrilled. "I used to have a pet bunny rabbit, Ernst. Back when I was five. I don't like having my memories sullied this way."

"Hmmm. You never struck me as a man who would hold sacred his cherished memories of a childhood bunny rabbit. What was its name? Rascal, maybe? Or Bugs?"

"No, actually, it was..."

"I'm not really interested, Karl."

"But it was a really cute name. We called him..."

Vossoff clapped a hand over his partner's mouth. "Listen to me," he said, very slowly and very dangerously. "If you persist in telling me the name you called your bunny rabbit when you were five, you will spend the five seconds immediately following that unsolicited revelation hurtling from the airlock in an advanced case of explosive decompression. I didn't really want to know; I only expressed interest to mock you." He removed his hand. "Do you understand?"

Nimmitz pouted. "But you asked..."

Vossoff almost dove for the silverware. He demurred only because he recognized that both he and Nimmitz had been under an unusual amount of stress lately; they'd only recently escaped from a remote planet where they'd spent a full decade trapped in a cave after being genetically transformed into a spectacularly unpleasant form of sentient alien moss. They'd be there still, courtesy of the powerful munitions company that had tricked them into agreeing to the change, had an independent government auditor inspecting the books not discovered that Nimmitz had accidentally misspelled his own name, rendering both his signature, and the contract, void.

Recovery came slowly after something like that, even with the aid of well-paid geneticists; for instance, Vossoff still secreted acid at unpredictable moments, frequently enough to sear away his clothes with no warning and render him a surprise hit at cocktail parties. Still, a business opportunity like this might be just the ticket to get back on track again. And so he addressed the Brain: "Send a message to the Glorvians. Tell them we'll be happy to drive off the bunny, in exchange for a mere 90 percent of their collected wealth. Make sure you specify that this does not include expenses, which may run as high as the remaining 10 percent. Backed up against the wall the way they are, I'm sure they'll agree to our generous terms with no problems."

"Yo," said the ship's Brain.

Nimmitz blinked. "Do you really think we oughta get involved with this, Ernst? We're not set up for great cosmic battles right now. We don't even have long-range blasters on this rig."

"Maybe not," shrugged Vossoff, "but it's always rabbit season, somewhere..."

THE INSTANT THE GLORVIANS EAGERLY ACCEPTED his terms, Vossoff got on the hytex and broadcast a universal white-flag signal to the giant bunny.

Nimmitz's huge brow knit with a determined lack of comprehension that not even nuclear weaponry could have dented. "I don't like this, Ernst. That's an awfully big bunny."

"Obviously," said Vossoff. "That's the key to the whole puzzle."

"Huh?"

"Someday I'm going to have to take you to a public genomat and

treat you to your first IQ point. Don't you see how hard it must have been engineering that dreadnought to look and move like a terran bunny? Designing robotics to drive the legs, installing motors to keep the pink nose twitching, wrapping the whole thing in a fuzzy metallic coat capable of looking soft and fluffy under interstellar conditions, and arming it with what must be tremendously advanced quantum dampers to keep it from being torn to pieces by the tidal forces of the planets it catches between its paws? Especially when you consider that if these are the kind of folks who go around destroying whole solar systems at a clip, then they're probably also the kind of folks who don't like bunny rabbits in the first place?"

"Not like bunny rabbits?" gasped Nimmitz. "The fiends!"

"The real question," Vossoff said doggedly, "is why they went to all that trouble, when the average genocidal warmonger wouldn't bother. Which is why it's so important to establish a dialogue. Once we determine their reasoning, we'll be well on our way to knowing how to—"

The ship's Brain broke in. "Yo. Boss. The alien warship just sent a return message."

"Holo?"

"Nope. Audio only."

It was better than nothing. Vossoff said, "Play it."

What followed was the most ungodly yelling either Vossoff or Nimmitz had heard in years. It sounded a little like cats turned inside-out by matter transmission, and a lot like the new hit album by the Exploding Idiots, except in both cases considerably less musical.

It went on like that for a while. It didn't get any better.

Nimmitz rubbed his bald scalp with the dedication of a man struggling to confirm that his skull was still intact underneath. "My head hurts."

Vossoff chuckled. "I find this fascinating, myself. An entirely tonal language. Reminds me of the Orbisonians of Wilbri IX, who have to hold a single high note for years at a time just to say hello. Brain, can you translate any of that?"

"That is translated," said the Brain.

There was a moment of uncomfortable, not even remotely blessed, silence, as both Vossoff and Nimmitz struggled to accept that as a reasonable answer.

Vossoff leaned closer to the screen. "Come again?"

"You heard me right, boss. The giant bunny's entire transmission consists of incoherent yelling."

Nimmitz said, "Reminds me of us, the way we usually end up." When Vossoff glared at him, he stuck out his lower lip petulantly: "Well, it does."

"There are certain surface similarities," conceded the Brain. "But I've also run a complete tonal analysis, searching for the stress indicators common to most sentient species, and I can detect no overt signs of your usual terror or despair. In fact, I think it's baby talk."

Vossoff drummed his fingertips on the control panel, ruminating that thought, as if it were some cosmic cud and he the great galactic cow. As he concentrated, his thick, bushy eyebrows knit together so tightly they looked like they were mating. Eventually, he brightened. "Brain?"

"Yo."

"Please send that vessel another message. In baby talk. No content whatsoever. Sweeten it so it's the right tone and pitch, and then loop it and play it loud on all available channels."

"Yo," said the Brain, as it signed off.

Nimmitz frowned at the viewscreen—where the giant fluffy bunny was even now adorably twitching its powder puff tail—and then at Vossoff, who was contemplating a bottle of the ship's finest champagne. He scratched his head, started to say something, found something on the ceiling compelling enough to stare at, then, at long last, admitted his secret shame: "I don't get it, Ernst."

Vossoff chugged directly from the bottle. "Gee, that's a shocker."

The giant bunny on the viewscreen abruptly paused mid-meal, facing them with the closest thing any bunny can get to fascination.

As they watched, one of its moist brown eyes slid open, revealing a vast, shiny docking bay easily large enough to accommodate their own tiny spaceship with room to spare. The landing lights were on and blinking.

"You know," said Vossoff, "sometimes I'm so brilliant I even astound myself."

Nimmitz merely scratched his head worriedly.

THE INTERIOR OF THE ALIEN DREADNOUGHT turned out to be hospitable to human life in all the important ways, and thoroughly irritating in all the unimportant ones.

The important ways included the breathable atmosphere, the comfortable ambient temperature, and the apparently total absence of things like squadrons of implacable indestructible hunter-killer robots bristling with high-tech weaponry and programmed to ruthlessly exterminate all intruders.

These were good things.

The unimportant ways mostly consisted of the deafening ungodly racket. The endless incoherent screaming that echoed loudly from elsewhere in the ship was not nearly as annoying as the even louder Muzak, which resembled a melody about as much as the North America nebula, seen from inside, actually resembled a continent. The melody was bright and cheery and filled with zest for life, and it was, therefore, instantly depressing beyond belief.

As they emerged from their ship and took their first clumsy steps onto the oddly padded floors of the docking bay, Nimmitz said, "Ernst? I think I recognize the tune."

"I'm thoroughly impressed that you can even discern one. The composer should be flogged."

"No, really. I used to listen to this every afternoon when I was a kid. It was the theme music of the *X'norr'gthi the Carnosaur* show. Remember?"

"Oh, Lord, no," Vossoff moaned, because now that Nimmitz mentioned it, he did remember. A creation of the evil Nahnseekai Empire, who were at that time at war with everybody, *X'norr'gthi the Carnosaur* had been an insidious propaganda show shown on most holo systems and virtual reality networks throughout the known universe. Essentially just another jolly striped foam-rubber lizard, he'd captured the imaginations of an entire generation by teaching life-affirming lessons like "You will all be destroyed." Billions of children all over the galaxy had defected to the enemy, only to return in hordes when they turned old enough to find *X'norr'gthi* as thoroughly insipid as their parents did.

"Great galaxies," Nimmitz said sentimentally, "I missed this stuff."

"You would," muttered Vossoff. "But I'm glad you identified it for me. It leads me to believe my theory is correct. Come on." He led Nimmitz to the huge double-doors at the far end of the docking bay, which opened automatically as the two men approached. "This should take us to the control room. In the meantime, I suppose I owe you an explanation, so listen carefully. Imagine you belong to the ruling class of a ruthless warmongering alien race."

Nimmitz stood stock-still and closed his eyes. "OK."

Vossoff entered the elevator—which itself was large enough to admit a five-story building—then realized Nimmitz hadn't joined him and yanked him aboard. "What are you doing?"

"I'm imagining."

"Can't you imagine and follow me at the same time?"

"Not vividly," said Nimmitz.

"Imagine less-than-vividly and keep up with me."

"OK," said Nimmitz, imagining less than vividly.

The huge elevator automatically closed and began to descend. Vossoff incinerated the stereo speakers with his pocket blaster, just to silence the bouncy idiocies of the *X'norr'gthi* theme song, and spoke quickly: "All right. You belong to the ruling class of a ruthless warmongering alien race. You can't be home with your children all the time because you're usually away in other solar systems, conquering

people. Who do you get to babysit the kids?"

Nimmitz blinked. "I don't know. Depends if the next-door neighbors have a teenaged daughter who needs mad money."

"Nice try, but she's probably in your gunnery hatch, nuking the orphanages and hospitals. No...if you're truly demented enough, you commission Baby's First Warship, automate it enough to be piloted by a gurgling infant, install the little tyke as captain, and let the kid run amuck in solar systems where nobody has sufficient firepower to fight back. That way, when you're back from cutting your bloody swath through the universe, you can pick up the kid, and coo indulgently over all the emerging civilizations it wiped out during your absence. Got that?"

About thirty seconds later, Nimmitz did. "Wait a minute. You're telling me that's why it's shaped like a giant bunny?"

"Precisely."

"That's crazy!"

"I agree. Unfortunately, it's not my fault some parents dress their kids funny."

"B-but...how would the baby even know it was *in* a giant bunny?"

"I posit some sort of advanced virtual reality technology, hooked up to the baby's visual cortex, but frankly, it doesn't really matter whether the baby knows or not. Toys intended for infants don't have to be sold to the infant, but to its parents, who, thanks to inescapable psychological associations, will invariably want something representationally cute. Like a terrestrial bunny, which just happens to be a primary symbol of cuteness throughout the cosmos."

"Even if the bunny's destroying inhabited planets?"

"Especially if the bunny's destroying inhabited planets! Warlike races are like that! Have you ever heard of the Jannai, for instance? They bombarded innocent worlds with enzymatic cannons capable of reducing animal life to liquid protoplasm, until the entire planetary surface was covered with warm icky goo. Why? Because their kids liked fingerpainting. Next to that, this is downright cuddly."

"And why did it let us inside?"

"Because when I sent that return message in baby talk, the ship's translation program invited me inside to play." Vossoff cracked his knuckles proudly. "All very elementary stuff, really."

"Yeah," said Nimmitz. "Like wanting to run and hide."

After that, the elevator descended several kilometers in silence, the only sounds being Vossoff chortling in anticipation of his imminent riches, and Nimmitz moaning as he waited to be bitten by the familiar iron jaws of fate.

They were deep in the belly of the bunny, two hours later, when the elevator came to a stop and the light over the immense elevator doors helpfully went ding.

The doors slid open, revealing —

— WELL, LET'S PUT IT THIS WAY.

There exists a great deal of rude barroom debate, among the rummies of the cosmos, over which intelligent species bears the ugliest young. The top contenders of this honor include the K'cenhowten, whose offspring resemble mangos thrown into propeller blades; the SheeTetas, whose little lumps of joy are frequently mistaken for free-ranging goiters; and the Pylthothi, about whom the less said the better. But even *they* wouldn't have placed so highly had they been forced to compete with this creature.

Not that its appearance was even remotely alien. Far from it: its phenotype was as close to humanoid as a fifty-meter baby subject to all the limitations of the square-cube law could possibly be. But it was also possessed of the power-hungry scowl common only to those species vile enough to be Machiavellian at birth—a face a mother could have loved only if that mother were one of the Borgias. Fortunately for Vossoff and Nimmitz, it didn't immediately notice it had visitors, as all its attention was occupied by the floating holographic bunny busily eating a holographic planet at eye-level. As the two men watched, the baby tilted its head slightly, directing the holographic bunny to take another chomp of the unfortunate holographic planet; when the western hemisphere split in two, the baby expressed its approval with an enthusiastic, "AAAAAAAAAAAAAH-

HHHHHHHHHHH!"

The chamber was filled with life-support machinery for the tremendous tot—including roaring aqueducts that provided tsunami of strained fruit for its feeding, gigantic steaming vats dedicated to sterilizing its tent-sized diapers, and dozens of humanoid metallic servants who fluttered about dabbing its delicate skin with tons of soft white powder.

Nimnitz took one look at the baby and almost toppled from vertigo. "Gee, I hope for the mother's sake the birth was Caesarean."

Vossoff resisted sincerely thanking Nimnitz for the wonderful image. "Hey, see that cube-shaped machine over there?"

"The one shaped like a cube?"

"Yes, Karl, the one shaped like a cube. I'm sorry if I wasn't specific enough for you."

"That's OK," said Nimnitz. "I see it."

"Well, that's a Bettelhine Munitions Mark VIII Navigational Databank. It's loaded with complete files on all the planetary systems in the known universe. Ten to one, this one's been programmed with specially customized subroutines subtly steering the tot to the places where his doting parents would like him to run amuck. So it shouldn't take me more than five minutes to hack the program, change the parameters, and steer the kid away from this solar system. We'll have saved an entire civilization—and become very, very rich men—with-out even breaking a sweat."

"And what's that structure over there?" Nimnitz pointed. "The great big spherical thing, with the rod sticking out of it?"

Vossoff peered at the distant spherical thing, and frowned. He didn't know. It was set on the ground, right beside the pilot. He doubted that it had anything to do with navigation, which was the most immediate problem, but it resembled no other space-travel paraphernalia he'd ever seen, which meant that it could conceivably be some kind of cutting-edge technology unknown to Man. The idea of stealing its design, and thus making not one but two immense fortunes in one day, was too outrageous to exist. "Tell you what," he said. "I deal with the Databank, you investigate that sphere. Find out what you can about it, without touching anything, and I'll meet you there in a few minutes to tell you why you got it all wrong."

"Sure," said Nimnitz. He turned to go, walked five steps, and committed a perfect indignant double take. "Hey!"

REPROGRAMMING THE DATABANK DIDN'T TAKE Vossoff five minutes. It took six. But that was only because the wiring was crusted over with strained vegetables—apparently Junior liked to throw his food, and the edible paste had dripped down the bulkhead and gotten into the machinery. It wasn't an insurmountable problem; after all, Nimnitz, who had similar table manners, frequently splattered their own hyperdrive generator the same way.

Vossoff deftly cobbled up a new program which would encourage the pilot toward an uninhabited system some fifty light-years away, and stopped just short of activating it, before using his pocket hyltex to contact the imperiled civilization on Glorvia IV. Reaching the ruler of said civilization, a creature that resembled a sad compromise between a frog and drafting table, he confirmed that the deal to sign over 90 percent of the treasury in exchange for planetary salvation was still in effect. The king assured him that Glorvia was more than willing to accept miserable poverty rather than suffer the even more miserable humiliation of having the planet eaten by a bunny. Vossoff hesitated, thanks to the familiar chill he always experienced whenever he seemed about to attain everything he ever wanted—a sensation that came from being brutally screwed out of it so many times. He repeated: "Ninety percent. Plus expenses."

"Yes, yes! Only hurry, before my subjects lose all hope! They're already lighting the sacred incense of mass defenestration!"

"Done," said Vossoff. He activated the program.

This was a remarkable moment, unprecedented in the history of the Vossoff/Nimnitz partnership—the first time either one of them had actually succeeded at anything. Because Vossoff and Nimnitz happened by, the giant bunny did change course, the Glorvian civilization was saved, and the Glorvian people did survive to eventually achieve greatness as the exporters of the galaxy's single most malodorous brand of cheese.

Alas, the moment after that was far more typical, as Vossoff waltzed away from the Databank only to be immediately pounced on and eaten.

He didn't realize he'd been pounced on and eaten—the process being so instantaneous that he perceived it as a sudden undignified plunge into a bowl filled with marbles. He said the only thing he could say in such circumstances, which was "Mmmrph!"

Nimnitz cried out to him from the darkness. "Ernst!"

Vossoff managed to fight his way to the surface of the marble sea. "Karl?"

"Ernst!"

"Karl! Where the hell are we?"

"Inside the round thing!" shouted Nimnitz.

"You mean the spherical device with the long protruding rod?"

Somewhere inside the chamber, a tidal wave of marbles shifted position noisily. "Yes! That!"

"And what, may I ask, are we doing inside the spherical device with the long protruding rod?"

"I don't know!" cried Nimnitz. (Marbles jangled together again.) "As soon as I got close enough, it rocketed across the deck, opened up, and scooped me in! Then it started driving around looking for you! I've been keeping my head above aggies ever since!"

Vossoff's brain churned furiously. "It must be some kind of maintenance device, designed to pick up after the kid."

"I don't care about that!" hollered Nimnitz. "It's dark in here!"

"Calm down. This is a minor complication at best. We have plenty of time to figure out an escape route so we can return to our ship and collect our obscenely lucrative reward. I promise you, Karl—this time tomorrow, we'll still be wealthy men."

The marbles shifted. "You really think so?"

"Yes, I really think so."

"You sure?"

Vossoff sank a little deeper into the marbles himself. "Frankly, no..."

IT WAS SOMETIME LATER.

The fuzzy pink bunny had left the Glorvian system and was now headed out into interstellar space. Even with state-of-the-art warp capability, it would not arrive anywhere equally interesting for at least one terran month; its screens would be blank, its ability to entertain its pilot temporarily nil.

As was only fair and reasonable, the autopilot engaged, instantly disconnecting the giant tyke from all command functions, and granting him a break from his reign of destruction.

As was also only fair and reasonable, the pilot blinked, made a noise very much like "goo," and surveyed the command center for something capable of occupying his time until the next planet needed eating.

Very quickly, he spotted something.

He picked up his rattle—a sphere attached to a protruding rod-shaped handle, which doubled as a maintenance drone whenever not in use—and began to shake it vigorously.

It made most unusual noises, some of which resembled the gravely shifting of marbles, some of which an adult of its species might have recognized as yells and grunts and pleas to be let out. Noises that delighted the giant pilot and prompted him to shake his favorite toy even harder.

He played with the rattle incessantly for most of his journey toward the next solar system.

But, hard as he tried to shake the rattle, after the first week the yelling and grunting and pleading grew much harder to hear.... □

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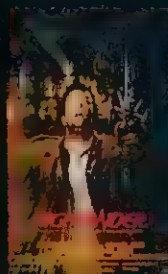
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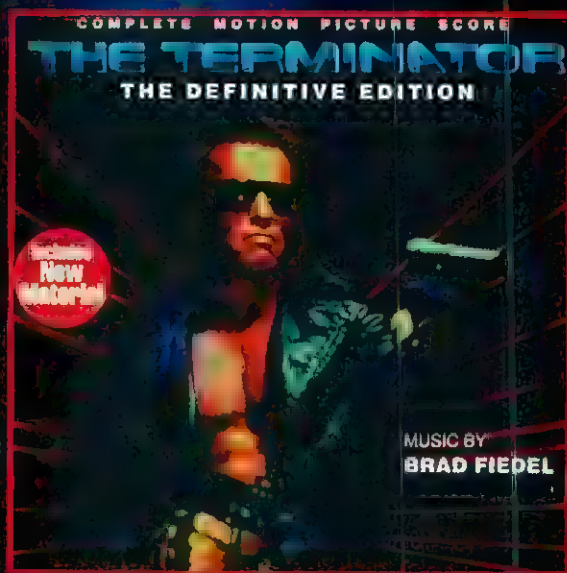
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Murder has come to Vonar, a world that has never known murder before. What the killer didn't count on was that Trapper Ramant has come as well.

BY KANDIS ELLIOT
Illustration by Janet Aulizio Dannheiser

AMANT WATCHED THE WORLD of the Vonarians rise up to meet him through the transports' stabilizing reality bubble. Vonar had remained a waver of starshine while the ship passed the non-hours in planar warp, then it abruptly became a planet in a star system, and now it was resolving into seas and puffy clouds and green lands distantly sprouting cities, in one of which was the Vonar port-of-entry, and a murderer somewhat more queer than most.

"Passengers prepare for disembarking," crooned an intercom voice. "Vonarian citizens will exit first from midship hatch one. All non-Vonarians must remain seated until granted leave into the port-of-entry. You may then exit from forward hatch two."

Ramant gathered his large and heavy effects bag from his seat's stowage and poked

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THE ANDROID WIZARD

a finger at an intercom button. Its yellow response light blinked. "Yes, sir?"

"I would like to disembark along with the Vonarian citizens, if I may," he murmured to the pickup. He refrained from adding, *it's a matter of security. Mine.* "I'm sorry, sir. That is not standard procedure." Although the voice did not belong to a Vonarian, Ramant could still hear an unspoken, *offworlder contamination simply won't do.* "We can arrange for you to disembark at the head of *your* line, if you wish."

"Thank you," Ramant replied without specifying his wishes, and poked off the connection. He glanced through his viewport, watched docking structures welcome his transport into the enclosed terminal, then turned a clandestine eye back toward the Vonarian section.

FOURTEEN CITIZENS WERE GATHERING their chattels and queuing before their designated hatch. With their bland, tannish outfits and tall, slim figures, they might have been a gathering of beverage bottles. Except that all fourteen could have taken

Ramant's breath away by their sheer beauty, had he allowed himself the pleasure of further admiring them as true women. He checked the flight stewards.

One had positioned himself forward; the other stood at the gap between the non-Vonarian section and the citizens' section. While the second fellow's attention strayed impulsively to the Vonarians, Ramant took a deep breath and focused inwardly for a few heartbeats.

When the midship hatch opened, he slid off his seat, wrestled his bulky effects bag along the aisle and under the nose of the gap-guarding steward, and joined the line of disembarking Vonarians. They did not acknowledge an addition to their number. By the time the Nons' hatch finally opened, Ramant had trudged down the other gangplank, parted company with the citizens, and melted into the more colorful throng of offworlders, none of whom cast even a glance in his direction. From a discreet distance he scanned both the disembarkers and those awaiting them. Taxi pilots and baggage handlers hustled for fares and tips. Their eager gazes passed over Ramant and his load as though he weren't there.

Conversely, one husky, hairy taxi pilot caught Ramant's attention almost at once. From the open cockpit of his unoccupied vehicle, the cabbie refused a solicitation and a moment later ignored an obvious hail, even though both the cab's "Reserved" and "On Break" signals were dimmed.

As he watched, Ramant shifted his luggage from side to side, the stuffed bag thumping against one knee or the other as his shoulder cramped.

"Let me carry that for you," said a soft contralto voice.

Ramant turned. A tall, youngish Vonarian detached herself (*itself*, his mind scolded) from the citizens-only walkway peopled by tall, young, and youngish Vonarians. There weren't any *old* Vonarians, as far as he knew, and compared to him they were all tall. And—in his eyes—all female.

"I'm Boë D'Hesh, your liaison with Vonarian Internal Affairs. I've been in charge of the investigation." The newcomer took Ramant's effects bag strap and gave him a moment to disentangle numb fingers. He was handed a biocomp reader and a sheaf of papers, both attesting to Boë D'Hesh's legitimacy.

Ramant studied the Vonarian as she (no, *she-he*, no, *it*, no, not nice, *thing*, God, that's worse—ah hell, *she*, then) easily carried the

bag in one hand and led the way through the port-of-entry crowd toward the taxi runway. "Apologies, Trapper Ramant," she said in her beautiful voice. "I missed your disembarking even though I closely observed each soul descend the gangplank. Your reputation is quite justified, sir."

He could hardly perceive his host(ess) as anything other than a woman, a very stunning one at that. She wore an unassuming, loose tan jumpsuit that gave her body (thin, lithe, curvy, boyish) room to move, and which nicely accented her face (strong, soft, roundish, flat) and hair (shortish-long, darkish mousy-dishwater). Her eye-riveting magnetism was not lessened by the fact that she was one of a comely multitude—the port-of-entry's population beyond the gangplank exits is almost pure Vonarian, save for souvenir-stand entrepreneurs and foreign visitors here, like himself, strictly on business. The foreigners were the only ugly people in sight. Unless, Ramant thought dryly, he were to glance at his own ID holo.

Boë D'Hesh flagged a taxi already banked on an interception course. Ramant narrowed an eye. Piloting it was the hairy fellow who had refused other easy fares. Close up, Ramant noted he was a true man from one of the Cluster's interior worlds, evidenced by his facial hair. He tossed Ramant's luggage in the hold and held the hatch. "Where to, folks?" he asked, as though the pickup were utterly coincidental.

"Throne's Guesthouse," the Vonarian replied. "If that is satisfactory, Trapper Ramant?"

Trapper. Ramant cringed. "Of course." The cabbie studied him.

Before sealing the hatch after them and climbing into a separate cockpit, the taxi pilot gave Boë D'Hesh a lingering look as well: the admiring look men give to sexy women. *Surely*, Ramant thought, *he has to know what the thing really is.*

Ramant settled gratefully and gave the port-of-entry terminal and its bright lights and tide of people a last, tight-focused perusal—so far he'd detected nothing that might be a spy-eye or other unwholesome device. Nonetheless, he kept a mental antenna on full alert. *She* had flagged this taxi. She had chosen the hotel, she had tipped off his identity to the fortuitous cabbie. *And* she'd recognized him when he was trying, albeit not *too* hard, to be unnoticeable.

He said quietly, "Don't refer to me as a trapper in front of strangers. It targets me, and they're not necessarily strangers."

The Vonarian blinked. "I—I'm sorry, Tra—uh, Marn—uh, Inspector."

"Use 'mister.'"

"—Mister Ramant. I will be attentive to such divulgences. However, I'm afraid your arrival is as much public knowledge as the murder itself. I must warn you," the liaison continued, "I am not a criminal investigator. I am the lab manager at the victim's workplace. Internal Affairs agreed I could best supply you with information about this matter."

Ramant nodded. Police detectives probably failed to exist on Vonar. "Well, I'm glad you were at my disposal with that damn bag." He rubbed his shoulder. "I never mean to pack the whole office, but I throw one thing in there and then another I think I can't do without—it gets to be a collection." The taxi received clearance, ascended above the crowd, and canted toward an egress gate. "All right, brief me. But let's limit it to that public knowledge you mentioned."

"The victim was killed last night at hour 23.15. Tes name was Iptim Op'tarmk and te was nineteen years old. Te had recently graduated from the Institute and had worked only a two-year at Interworld Plasm Export, in my lab—the extent of my acquaintance with ter."

Ramant's brain had to switch gears. Of course he knew that the Vonarians used a gender-neutral pronoun set when referring to themselves, and he'd even practiced it, but when it rolled off Boë's sweet and mellow tongue it sounded like an alien

language. *Well, all right*, he thought, *keep reminding me that she's not a she even though she looks like a she and she'll be a she as long as I'm working with her.*

The liaison added, "Marn Op'tarmk was part of a small task force working on formation-induction of geneplasm variants. That kind of research is referred to as F-I mashes."

She went on to explain about uses of F-I mashes, from developing novel purple fruits to stringing new biowiring for everything from biocomputers to weaponry for the Throne. Interesting, Ramant thought, to describe a victim in terms of work. That Miss—*Marn* Op'tarmk's work had ramifications to just about all genetically engineered products in use by Cluster worlds was interesting, too. Black-market interesting. But enough. "Let's skip to the meat. How did you decide that Vonar's got its very first murder on its hands?"

She looked rather horrified. "Mister Ramant, three physicians pronounced Op'tarmk murdered. Te was fried through the brain, from behind, by a standard disruptor pistol, while tes hands were tied behind tes back and while te was kneeling, naked, on the bedroom floor of tes own quarters. A sweep of all cellular debris and excretion residue reveals that only *Vonarians* had ever entered Op'tarmk's quarters. It was an execution-style killing, as your kind call it, and I'm afraid that's all we can say."

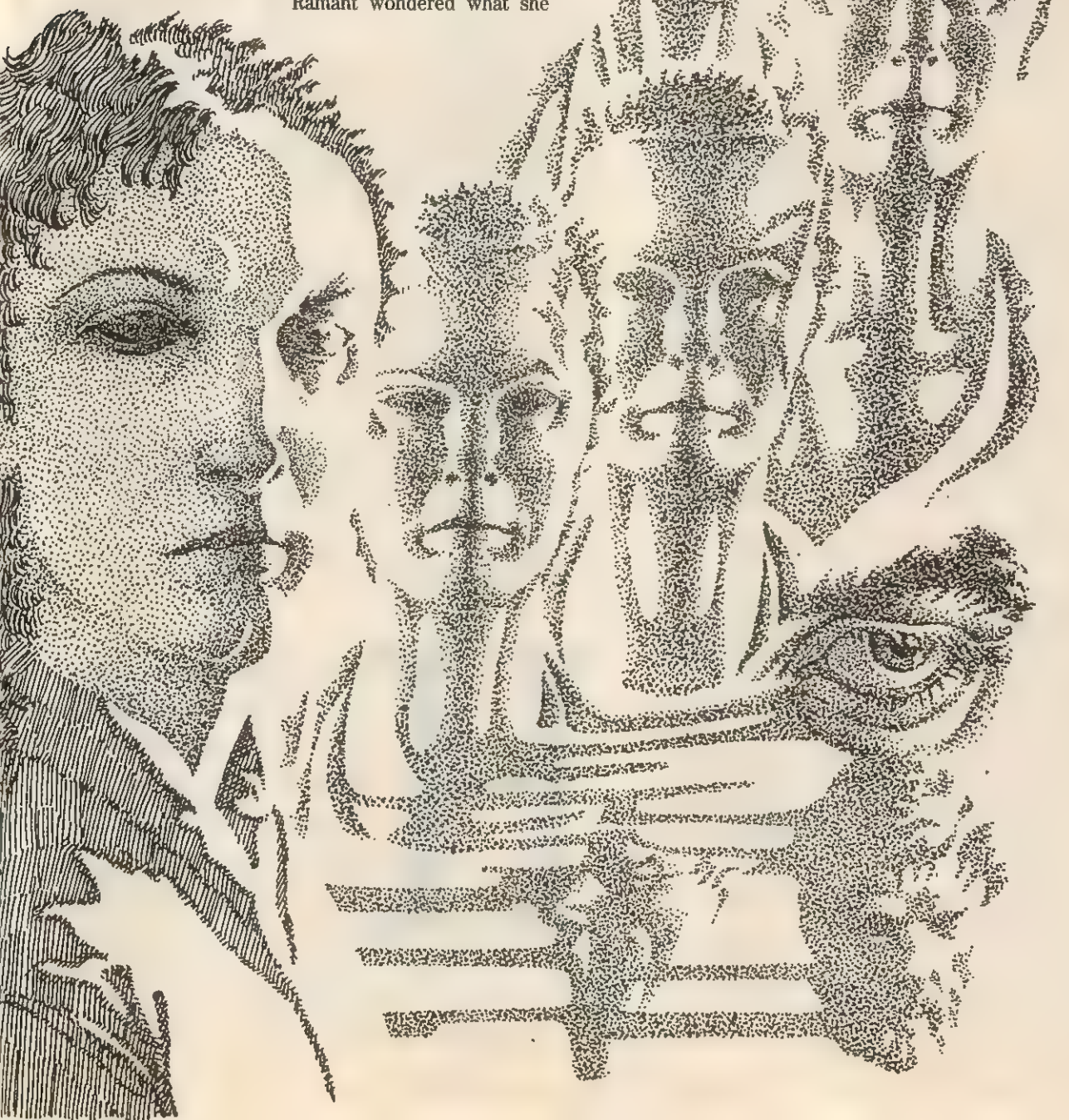
Ramant wondered what she

meant by "your kind." Murderer-trappers? Throne agents in general? Or all dioecious humans? "Any suspects? Motives?"

"Who and why is the reason *you* were brought into the investigation. And," she added, "it is *not* the first murder to occur on Vonar. Hostilities are common among foreigners here. However, it is the first known murder of a Vonarian by another Vonarian. That is why we are at such a loss."

"You can't even speculate why this gal—person—was brain-slopped by one of her own sisters?"

If his gender-loaded references irked Boë—he just couldn't think fast enough to word it any other way—she didn't show it. "What motive could any of us possibly have to kill?"



He ticked off reasons on his fingers. "Money. Hate. Love. In that order."

She shook her head; her just-slightly too large eyes baffled. "We have ecumenical allocation of funds and resources. Greed is a non-sequitur. Anyone dissatisfied with the situation is free to go offworld. Vonarians are in demand at research facilities all over the Cluster. Any one of us can have more opulent living conditions if we wish. However, Vonar is not exactly a poverty planet, and our citizens are hardly in material want."

Ramant concurred. Vonar was the wealthiest global economy after the Throne world. He looked out at promenades criss-crossing the sprawling, arboretumlike metropolis. Ninety percent of the structures were underground, leaving the surface for gardens, parks, and other natural areas. The taxi lane ran between ground level and overhead walkways connecting the upside buildings, whose design was less aesthetic than functional. The taxi passed between open-air markets, playgrounds, even stretches of agricultural plots, all similar to those on ninety-six other Cluster worlds, but different in that there was no filth, untidiness, nor...restlessness. He saw no want, and believed there would be none anywhere else on the planet, although something about this Vonarian paradise impressed him as rather stodgy. "All right. No money motive. Hate and love?"

"Hate or love." Boë D'Hesh leaned against the padded backrest. "No, I don't think so."

"Oh, really?" Hard to believe. They were still *human*, after all. "Well, I've heard the offworlder belief that Vonarians are sterile, and in fact impotent. That would pretty much eliminate lovers' motives for murder." He added, "If not motives for suicide."

She smiled slightly, for the first time. "I believe the common myth has us as double-sexed, possessing working parts of both genders, and that we enjoy not only simultaneous orgasm all by our lonesomes, but also highly versatile orgies involving role- as well as partner-swapping. Isn't that closer to what offworlders believe?"

He shrugged. Yeah. Only she worded it nicer.

She continued, "Mister Ramant, if we have any driving emotion, it is our enthusiasm for our work. A plasm researcher such as Iptim Op'tarmk might come home from overtime at the lab and apply equal energy to, say, breeding colorful aquarium fish. The common offworlder misconception about Vonarians..." Her lip began a disgusted curl, which she tried to control without much success. "Vonarians are more than a community of intellectually superior scientists. After fifty generations of selective breeding, we are a perfected, genotypically distinct race that would no more consider relations based on casual contact than we would mate with sheppoxen or fangbeasts or...." She gestured weakly toward him, a little embarrassed. Very little.

Sooner brain-slop yourselves than breed with foreigners, eh? he thought.

She collected herself, returned pedantic and a bit icy. "But you see, our sexuality *precludes* all the petty jealousies, desires, and aggressiveness—love and hate—arising from the need to find and possess a compatible mate. We all are compatible with any other. We have *harmony*."

He checked the terrain again. Ahead poked a dense cluster of tall edifices. Swarms of transports, taxis, and other vehicles buzzed around the heads of the buildings, giving the city a more familiar aspect. Pedestrians had melted away, absorbed by various portals or moving stairs going down into the city proper. The taxi angled sharply starboard and lowered toward the landing tongue of a gleaming, gold-embossed edifice whose opulence immediately evoked images of the Throne.

"Mister Ramant," Boë ventured, "is it true that you only need one clue to deduce the murderer?"

"If it's the *right* one." He smiled wryly. "You got anything more for me about Op'tarmk?"

For the first time she looked a little nervous. "I've told you all the *public* knowledge."

The hatch wheezed open; the cabbie went back to fetch the

effects bag out of the hold. Ramant said, "After I stow my luggage, I'll visit the morgue and the murder scene."

"I'll make arrangements." As they slid out, she added, "I do not wish to give the wrong impression. Vonarians are not saints. We are capable of rivalries, we can certainly value one friendship more highly than another. But above all, we are guided by *reason*, not by passion." She picked up his heavy effects bag, did nothing about paying for the taxi, and headed for gigantic glitz-and-glassite doors. Ramant noted the cabbie giving her one last appreciative look. Even though the man must have plenty of Vonarian-ogling opportunities, Ramant could understand why it never wore thin. Every time he looked at Boë D'Hesh anew, the same little jolt of electricity went through him. Not that he couldn't put it aside, but the effort wasted psychic energy, and those kinds of little jolts just royally interfered with murder investigations.

The hotel steward was a woman, but not Vonarian. She was short, stocky, had thick lips lined with grin-creases despite her relative youth, and grunted as she pushed the dolly with his effects bag into a posh VIP suite. Nonetheless, she seemed sweet-natured, giving Ramant a genial nod and a card.

"If there's anything you need, sir," she said, "I'm Arrow Of Lights."

He guessed she was native to Water, a Cluster-edge planet. Its island citizens fancied evocative names. She addressed Boë D'Hesh with a *very* pleasant smile and also handed the Vonarian a card. "Anything at *all*, sir. Just remember Arrow." She winked suggestively. At Boë.

While his Vonarian liaison left to arrange permits and transportation, Ramant unpacked, hanging two changes of uniform in the wardrobe and arranging some of the bag's other items here and there in drawers, the chest, and the bureau. He then filled a black pouch with small tools of his trade, donned his field jacket, one sans epaulets of his rank, pulled the tools pouch strap over his shoulder, and made a quick check of his image in the mirror. "Professional, tidy, sweet-smelling, and sanitary," he laughed.

He narrowed his eyes and concentrated until his reflection grew transparent. As it vanished he nodded in satisfaction, then checked everything lockable, added a few of his own locks, strode out the door, and headed down the several flights of staff-only stairs. He passed maids, stewards, and other workers, all non-Vonarians; none turned to ask him if he needed to find the guests' lifts or if he'd gotten lost.

He stood for a full minute on the balcony overlooking the lavish lobby to survey the few Vonarian guests—all eye-catchingly lovely—and the many more offworlder VIPs and staff. Boë D'Hesh sat in a red-plush chair, patiently watching the lifts and stairs in turn. He held his focus tightly as her gaze passed through him several times. Then he relaxed; her eye stayed on the balcony, she blinked, and finally saw him.

Ramant chuckled. "Story of my life," he muttered under his breath. "Ramant, be grateful a pretty girl notices you at all."

HE WAITED PENSIVELY AS A WHITE-smocked Vonarian approached down the medical facility corridor. While liaison Boë D'Hesh intercepted this officious personage and handed over credentials, Ramant tried to keep his mind on the fact that he was simply going into yet another stasis locker to view yet another corpse. Two distracting facts kept jumping the needle on his anticipation

meter. One, Boë wouldn't talk about the non-public facts he was supposed to learn, evidently, from the murder victim herself. (Itself, herself...don't start that again!) And two, he was about to see a *naked* dead Vonarian.

Ramant frankly didn't know what to expect. It always seemed more fun to *imagine* what-the-hell; now he wished he'd been more professional about it. Being summoned to Vonar during breakfast and getting tossed on the transport just after lunch hadn't left him much time for study, especially with planar-warp threads time-synchronizing the entire Cluster. The medical reference on the transport 'comp stated that Vonarians were true androgynes. He'd skipped holopics of guts, bones, and musculature, shrugged over what appeared to be midgety male parts simply overlaid on female parts as though pages from two different texts were mixed up, and wondered about the male and female organs "reacting accordingly to situation and stimulus." He'd mused on milk. They were mammalian, like all humans; they had breasts. But wouldn't culture-tank babies be fed culture-tank milk? Or was it only some expectation in his male eyes that put such nice tits on them?

The giving-of-official-clearance seemed to take a lot of time. Evidently, Ramant thought, they didn't like offworlder voyeurs ogling their murder victims. He studied Boë and her sister Vonarian. They were both amazingly beautiful, in similar/different ways. He caught himself squinting. Dizzily he realized he would not be able to write a coherent description of either one of them. Worse than looking at store mannequins; in subtle, hard-to-see ways, they seemed to be constantly *changing*. Rationally, he knew that half of what an offworlder sees when he, or she, looks at a Vonarian, is something concocted by his, or her, brain. *He* sees a gorgeous female thing. *She* sees a gorgeous male thing. Knowing that didn't make it easier. Still, the two before him were meat and bone, their noses had distinctive shapes, their hair had colors and cuts peculiar to each, they were of different heights, if not by much; there had to be *some* way to see them analytically. Had they been ordinary humans, Ramant would have assumed they were related somehow. Artists—*male* artists—paint Vonarians as goddesses. Female artists recreate them as gods. The *whatever* wasn't limited to physical nearness, either. Although the effect hit far stronger in life, he'd looked at holopics of Vonarians and still saw them as pretty girls and then had to keep looking, wondering at something intangible he couldn't put his finger on; and he knew if he were a woman, he'd see handsome *guys* and would keep looking and wondering. So it wasn't pheromones. It was...the damndest thing, and the medical references seemed to have little to do with reality.

What the hell was the corpse going to look like to him?

The two Vonarians finally stopped their hushed argument; his liaison beckoned him over.

"Mister Ramant, this is Doctor Finciza. Te is health officer at Interworld Plasm Export."

Ramant remembered: the victim's workplace. "I see. And your role in the city morgue?" The doctor stiffened her spine more tightly, impossible as that seemed, looked askance at Boë, then a long ways down at him. "I was Iptim Op'tarmk's personal physician. I was also one of the first persons to arrive at the scene. Marn D'Hesh requested that I assist in this investigation."

Well, Ramant thought, *aren't we keeping this in-house*. "How did you come to be at the scene of the murder?"

"Marn Op'tarmk consulted me several times in recent weeks. Te feared that someone was going to harm ter. The—incident—occurred shortly before I was to arrive for an appointment. I had not been to tes quarters before; locating it delayed me a few moments. Otherwise I may have prevented the—incident. Or if te had not been so seriously wounded...but as it happened, there was nothing I could do."

Ramant received a follow-me gesture one might give a well-heeled pet, and the three of them went down the sterile, white, shiny institutional-hospital hall. At least Vonar's med facs looked and smelled like anybody else's.

"I am sorry to have made you wait," the recalcitrant doctor said.

She, too, had a throaty voice that *might* have been a man's if you were hearing it across, say, a real bad connection. "I've had to keep so many media people out of here. Moaners have been over-interested in this case."

"Moaners?"

"Monosexuals. Offworlders." She gave him an offworlders-are-sick look. "I had to know that your investigation would go no further than Vonarian Internal Affairs. Marn D'Hesh assured me of your total discretion."

He sent Boë D'Hesh a watch-what-you-promise look. "I can tell you that everything I learn goes to the proper Vonarian authorities, Doctor, but I'll eventually have to file a report with the Throne Tribunals Plenipotentiary. You *did* request our intervention, remember."

The doctor, who was making a lot of trouble and demands, Ramant thought, stiffened even more, then nodded just enough for acquiescence. "Of course." They stopped by a door with Vonarian markings. A familiar aura conveyed "Stasis Storage." The doctor flattened her palm on the latch panel; the door rolled aside and lights blinked on. They walked into the long, narrow, all-white room.

"Chamber ten," the physician said to an ostensibly blank wall. An iris fitting dilated and disgorged a transparent cadaver cylinder. The flat slab within was sheet-covered; the corpse, lying on its stomach, was not.

Iptim Op'tarmk had a slim, muscular physique, well-muscled arms and thighs, a rather thick waist for a woman, a rather flat butt. For the first time Ramant did not feel a complete sense of *female* when looking upon a Vonarian. Perhaps the whatever-it-is fades in death, he thought. But not entirely. Not by a long shot.

The hair—noticeably more auburn than the dishwater-tan-blond-brown he noticed on living Vonarians—was singed in a circle at the occiput, where the skull joined the neck. Ramant pushed his hand into the transparent cylinder that canopied the body. The material gave—wrapped like thin skin around his hand, arm, shirtsleeve, and descended with his fingers—as he touched the hole seared in the middle of Op'tarmk's burned hair. The searing ray, he knew, had once continued into her brain, stopped somewhere in the middle of it, condensed from hot entropic flux into a hotter ball of sub-dimensional tau spin that had no fundamental measurement, and proceeded to empty her skull of anything that existed in this universe. Except, of course, for matter immediately surrounding the teeny hot ball of fluxspin. *That* had percolated through the nearest steam vents, which in the human skull, including any bred on Vonar, were ear holes, nose holes, and eye sockets.

She had been laid flat on her face, what was left of it. Her ears were pink balloons, the stasis field holding the fluid-filled blisters as full as when she had been placed in the morgue.

"The body was found quickly, I take it?"

"The quarters' automonitor sensed the weapons-fire and also heard tes shriek, and alerted rescue teams," Boë said. "A neighbor dashed over almost at once."

Ramant turned to his Vonarian partner. "She was screaming?"

Boë looked down emotionlessly at her deceased countrywoman. "Not for help. Probably not even consciously. I am told it is one of the final reflexes of a brain hit by disruptor fire."

He nodded. "At close range, the beam doesn't have time to disperse, and the actual moment of death is delayed a few milliseconds." An automonitor, he considered. Friendly little house comp that sniffs for smoke, energy leaks, screams. "I'd like to speak with this neighbor. No one was seen running from the scene, I gather."

The doctor answered. "No. All witness statements are on record, of course."

He pulled his hand out of the cylinder cover, which re-tightened smoothly with a squeaky pop, and put his tools pouch on a side tray. He removed a silver stylus that emitted a narrow, hard-to-look-at violet light. "It'll enhance slight subdermal impressions," he explained to the Vonarians. "You know how, when you sleep on a wrinkled sheet, your arm is all grooved for a while? Well, that

sort of pressure mark is visible to this little gizmo for hours, sometimes days, after you think it's gone. Here—" He lifted the cadaver's near wrist, where a short red band of chaffed skin curved over the knot of the wrist-bone. Ramant's tool further illuminated criss-crossing rope impressions that circled both wrists like bracelets. He carefully went over the dorsal side of the body, revealing the familiar marks of clothing seams, waistband, shoe-lines on the feet. He gestured at the waiting doctor. "Help me turn her over."

The Vonarian, standing on the other side of the cadaver cylinder, hesitated. "What are you looking for?" she asked.

"I want to see if she'd been gagged. Or garroted. There might be enough left to make a determination." Nobody moved. He looked at Boë. "Did you check for it?"

Boë seemed a little speechless. "It's not in the autopsy—uh, why?"

"She'd been stripped, bound, made to kneel—or else her killer was hanging from the ceiling, to get that angle drilled into her skull—and she never alerted her automonitor?" He turned back to the doc, took a breath, and let her know what a Heinous Crimes Investigator sounds like when he's had it up to here with insubordination. "Get in here and help me flip her!"

The Vonarian jumped. Her hands dipped into the cylinder film, coated, and took the corpse by a shoulder and a hip. Ramant worked the opposite side. Over it went.

Revealing that she was a *he*. Not on the midget side, either, and a perfectly good *he* as far as Ramant could tell. He tried to recall the medical-text holos. They *were* perfectly good *he's*, weren't they? But perfectly good *she's*, too. Not Op'tarmk. A hint of breasts, hairy ones. He made a quick effort not to be caught staring at anatomy that wasn't often gagged or garroted, and examined the mess attached to narrow, well-muscled shoulders. Swimmer's muscle, bulked yet smooth. The slender neck was intact and unmarked except for a little round, red bruise—faded and older than the murder—below one blistered earlobe. The mouth was burned, but not enough to hide where a gag might bruise the soft tissue and tear the corners of the lips. Nothing like that was in evidence under the light.

Ramant was glad the flesh around the eyes had swollen tightly shut. Either the corpse no longer possessed eyeballs or they were nestled in there like hard-boiled eggs, and he really didn't need, much less want, to see any of that. He finished examining the rest of the body.

"All right," he said, softly this time. "Let's flip her back." The doctor immediately complied.

"That is an amazing instrument," Boë said. She'd watched the entire examination without flinching, Ramant noticed, even when he'd done the naughty parts. Op'tarmk had no suspicious marks on her-his body, other than the wrist bondage, the little red neck bruise, and effects of disruption.

"It's not top secret," he said. "Whatever you have for a forensics department should take a field trip to a Heinous Crimes Investigators' lab. You'd *really* be amazed."

"And appalled, I suspect. What have you deduced here?"

He put his stylus away slowly, considering. There was public information and there was a clue with which he was going to trap a murderer. He gave Doctor Finciza a speculative glance, then said, "First you tell me what I saw here that you couldn't tell me about in a port-of-entry taxi."

Boë scowled. Opened her mouth. Closed it. Then: "The victim...is no longer...perfect."

"What you see here," Finciza interjected forcefully, nodding toward the corpse without looking at it, "is not a true Vonarian. Te is a mutation."

"A mutation?"

"Te is almost fully male. As you *surely* noticed," the doctor said contemptuously.

"Well, I *noticed*, but—what is, ah, te, then—an offworlder?"

"No. Vonar bred and born. Genetic and biochemical analysis is conclusive."

He scowled at the corpse. "Is this...common? And could it have something to do with Op'tarmk's demise?"

"The condition was unknown until now," the doc replied. "We are genetically screened for mutations. No fetus like this would be brought to term. And you, as the murderer-trapper, will have to answer your second question. Did you find anything *besides* the obvious from your examination?"

Ramant shouldered his tools pouch. "There's something here that don't quite wash," he allowed. "Bound hostages can't help fighting their bonds. It's an instinct. Even unknowingly, they chaff the hell out of their skin. Your victim's rope burns were abrupt, clean-edged, and distinct—made during a single, hard tug, which I'd guess was the final convulsion. So why didn't Op'tarmk fight against the rope? It wasn't even tied tight." He'd deliberately avoided using a gender pronoun. Which proved a little difficult: He'd taken a big eyeful

"But you see, our sexuality aggressiveness—love and a compatible mate. We all

before Op'tarmk's sex got re-hidden, but even had her penis dangled to her knees, Op'tarmk's body would still shout *female*, loud and clear, to Ramant's subjective perceptions.

Boë watched the cadaver cylinder re-file into the morgue wall. "As I've explained, Vonarians are led by reason. It would have been unreasonable to bind the victim tighter than necessary. It would have been equally unreasonable to fight against inescapable bonds." They walked toward the hall.

"Is that all you found?" asked the doctor. "What about your clue that hangs a murderer?" She re-sealed the morgue door and looked up with keen interest.

"I only *trap* the murderers. They *hang* themselves." Ramant eyed her. Op'tarmk, he considered, consulted this physician about a fear. Is that reasonable? Wouldn't it be more reasonable to consult a psychologist? Or a bodyguard? "Doctor, I'm curious about that little red mark on the victim's neck. What do you think it was?"

She seemed truly at a loss. "Yes, that is a puzzle."

WE DISTURBED IT AS LITTLE as possible." Boë D'Hesh undid the fancy programming which prevented access to Iptim Op'tarmk's quarters, her fingers punching anti-codes into the official security door lock.

While she worked, Trapper Ramant admired the spacious, sunlit lobby that adjoined the murdered Vonarian's apartment. Op'tarmk lived in one of fifty surface units connected by short, enclosed foyers to an interior ring promenade. That ring encircled a parklike garden, complete with reflection

pond, small waterfall, and carefully tended flower displays. There was silence for meditation, muted colors for peace of mind, aesthetic architecture for an orderly philosophy. Nothing discordant, distracting, *stimulating*.

The door opened. Ramant took a last deep breath of vegetation-fresh lobby air, yanked up his tools pouch strap which was making one shoulder sore already, and walked in.

The after-stink wasn't as bad as at a lot of murder scenes he'd visited, probably because of a top-flight air purification system. A curved wall of windows brought in late afternoon sunshine and dappled shadows from lawn trees, making the oval main room bright, cheerful, and welcoming—a nice place to come home to. A third of the curving, inside wall opened onto a kitchen area, also sunlit by a skylight and double banks of windows opening on the opposite lawn. Vonarians evidently felt no need for secretive

to appear, well, at least *human* to him.

Like a good cop she hustled to the door, blocking the newcomer's entrance and view. "I'm sorry, this area is off limits." She flashed official documents as she backed the other Vonarian out into the lobby.

Ramant came up behind her. "And who might you be?" he asked, fearing Boë would heave-ho the gawker entirely.

The new Vonarian nearly jumped out of her socks at his sudden appearance. She hadn't seen him in the room behind. "My name is Chal Thiol Dem. I live over there." She pointed through the lobby window at the apartment where Ramant had seen the rubbernecker. "I saw someone in Iptim's quarters and—well, I just wanted to check. I am—was—a friend of Iptim. I know what happened. I helped in the investigation."

Boë introduced Ramant. "You wanted to meet the first person on

precludes all the petty jealousies, desires, and hate—arising from the need to find and possess are compatible with any other. We have harmony."

corners and drawn blinds. Quarters on adjacent sides of Op'tarmk's were visible some thirty paces either way. In one of them, Ramant noticed a figure watching from a corresponding kitchen window. The view at night would be notably public, he considered, if one didn't bother opaquing one's windows after dark. As the rubbernecker moved out of sight, Ramant realized that the figure gave the distinct, if distant, first-sight impression of *male*.

"This complex is for Vonarian citizens only, is that right?" he asked.

"Absolutely." Boë detailed her investigation team's examination of the apartment, and their conclusions. "Iptim Op'tarmk registered for several uploads and readings of technical files earlier last night." She pointed to the lit-up biocomp workstation in the living room. "Library records show that it was tes habit to study during down-times." She stepped into the kitchen and pointed at various food containers. "Te prepared a meal for one, which stomach contents show te consumed at least two hours before death." An unwashed plate and utensils sat on the counter. "My investigators had strict orders to leave everything exactly as they found it."

He studied the technical file still displayed on the biocomp screen: two short paragraphs and a hologic of a plant, a viney thing called a *jawnk*. "Op'tarmk was an amateur botanist?"

"Tes research involved plant breeding."

The main room and the kitchen, save for the dinnerware, were clean and tidy. A few potted jawnks grew in automatic terraria placed just so. Walls not occupied by windows were unadorned. The soft beige carpet did not steal from the soft sienna sofa, which complimented the ruddy, woodlike material of plain chairs and the biocomp workstation table. Neither a bachelor's nor bachelorette's room. Not even a grandma's. More like his hotel room.

The apartment door, left ajar, opened wide. A demanding Vonarian voice called in. "What's going on here? Who are you?" A tall, tan-jumpsuited and, of course, gorgeous woman stood with arms akimbo at the threshold.

As Boë whirled, Ramant focused tightly, first inwardly until his shadow on the carpet faded nearly completely away, and then on the intruder. An instinct already identified her as the nosy neighbor he'd seen through the kitchen windows. Again, he had a fleeting impression of *maleness* standing there. Maybe he was starting to crack their whatever-it-is, he thought. Even goddess Boë had begun

the scene," she told him.

"Indeed." Nosy neighbors; Ramant loved 'em. "Perhaps you could summarize what you saw for me, Marn Dem."

Chal Thiol Dem nodded. "Iptim arrived home at tes usual time. I saw no one enter or leave thereafter. Until, of course, the alarm summoned us all. I was first in the door simply because of my proximity. Several others arrived within moments."

Ramant sized up the witness. Smug and pedantic. Typical Vonarian. He wondered how close the friendship was. Tears certainly weren't overwhelming anyone. "Have you known Op'tarmk long?"

"No. I only moved here two months ago."

"Let me clear up something. Everything in this apartment was left undisturbed, yet I noticed that all the windows are transparent."

Dem nodded. "They were not opaqued last night, either."

"And yet you saw no one? Especially no one running from an alarm that sounded almost with the act of murder, and must have turned your head at once? If your head *needed* turning."

Dem straightened. "Your implication is unwholesome, Marn Ramant."

"You implied you followed Op'tarmk's movements all evening."

"I do not ward my friends and neighbors like an automonitor!" Dem bristled, then added, "I am simply familiar with their habits. I am here most of the time because I work out of my own quarters. I often watched for Iptim so that we could dine together and exchange news of our respective research. I want to clear up any misconceptions that—"

"You dined with Marn Op'tarmk last night?"

"No. Te was expecting another visitor. From tes laboratory."

Verified the doc's statement. "All right. So you ran over here, flung open the unlocked door, and you found the victim dead and alone."

"Yes. Except the door was already wide open. From this threshold I could see Iptim on the bedroom floor."

Ramant looked over his shoulder, through the front door, into the victim's quarters. Straight ahead was another door. Closed.

Leaving the neighbor to cool her heels in the lobby, Ramant returned to the interrupted investigation. This time Boë shut the door and reset the official security lock to activate automatically. He would remember that Vonarians had a penchant for leaving doors open.

"Dem's statement is in the report which I've had sent to your hotel's security biocomp. I'm sure you will be able to further interview ter if you feel the need later. Now—" She gestured to the rear of the austere quarters, at the closed bedroom door.

The bedroom was a little more decorated. The moment of bloody steam from Op'tarmk's frying brains had air-brushed carpet, bed, and coverlet with fine, watery-brown spatters. Cleaner areas in a spatter-circle on the carpet outlined the victim's shins where she had been kneeling. (Despite the morgue findings, Ramant still thought of her as female.) She'd been right up next to the bed. Most of the gore was on the mattress, and the pattern of thick and thin outlined her facial features where her head had pitched forward and landed there. The bedclothes were rumpled, but in the manner of a bed that was simply unmade.

He looked around at the rest of the bedroom, as spartan as the other rooms. And as windowed, but these windows were entirely opaqued, requiring the room lighting to be on full. Patio doors. The perp had access to a rear exit. "Footprints out there?" he asked Boë, who had not crossed the threshold.

"No unusual signs. The lawn vegetation is very resilient, and many people traverse it."

"What did your investigation team do here?" he asked.

"We took tissue, air, and wall filter samples for analysis. Tests showed that only Iptim Op'tarmk had bled or lost an abnormal number of cuticle cells or hairs, which we interpreted as a lack of violent struggle with an assailant." She looked at him for confirmation.

Ramant nodded. At least they knew *some* procedures.

"The tests also revealed that only Vonarians had visited these quarters. Residue quantities are consistent with a single visitor. Water usage indicated that someone employed the bathing facilities within an hour of the murder. We assume it was Op'tarmk. Tes body had fresh soap residue, and it was near a normal sleeping-hour. Vonarians," she added, "cleanse themselves before retiring."

Oh, gosh, Ramant thought. Unlike us unwashed moaners. "But wasn't she expecting the doctor? One usually doesn't take a bath while entertaining visitors."

"Perhaps te was anticipating a physical examination."

He pointed at the bank of wall-drawers. "What's in those?"

Boë detached herself from the doorway and went to open the drawers.

"You skinprinted them, of course?" he cautioned.

"Vonarians do not have individually distinguishable print patterns," she said. "Scars absorb. One of the disadvantages of genetic selection, as far as murder investigations go."

"You select for *fingerprints*?"

"For optimally functional skin patterns on optimally functional digits. Perfection is a very precise parameter, Mister Ramant."

"No kidding."

The drawers were not quite so tidy. The standard drab Vonarian colors and jumpsuits he'd come to expect were jumbled. "Your team pawed through this? All the cupboards and cabinets?"

"We did not 'paw.' We carefully kept things as they were in all storage compartments, food lockers, even the biocomp's cumuli decks. We sought anything out of the ordinary. There was nothing."

"What would you consider out of the ordinary?"

She shrugged. "Anything that wouldn't be in *my* wall drawers and cumuli decks. We didn't know *what* to expect."

"And you're satisfied that Marn Op'tarmk was perfectly ordinary?" He watched her stiffen in that rather nasty Vonarian way. "I mean, in regards to *this* kind of stuff." He jammed a finger at the clothes.

Boë finally admitted, "Tes lifestyle *appeared* to be commonplace in every way."

Except how it ended, Ramant thought. He looked back at the gory stains. That lifestyle ended right here, at nineteen years old. "Douse the light," he ordered, digging into his tools pouch, "and shut the door."

The room went utterly black. Ramant automatically kept track of

Boë D'Hesh's position by the door. It was one of those skills that keep murderer-trappers alive: the ability to sense the proximity of big, potentially dangerous animals in the dark.

Slowly a little yellow coal brightened and hung in the center of the room, near the bed. It sprouted a bright streamer about as long as an arm, which extended at a downward angle. The room grew turbidly illuminated.

"What is it?" Boë's voice hovered next to the door.

"Can you see this?" He moved closer to the brightest part of the hanging streamer and held out a small rectangular box, which he'd been manipulating.

"Yes. Another of your amazing tools, I take it. But where's the light coming from?"

"I've established the sub-planar residue of the murder weapon. It appears to be a standard palm disruptor. *Those* at least have fingerprints. Resonance match-patterns, that is. This brightest area is a representational hologram of the fired shot. Most of this dim glow is just spillover residue."

"What?" Boë asked raggedly.

"It corroborates what you've surmised about an execution. Use your imagination a little. You can almost see the participants as they were situated at the moment of the murder. That bright yellow spot marks where the needle of the gun was when the perp pulled the trigger. That short streamer is the beam sear, where it originated and where it ended as it went into flux inside Op'tarmk's brains. We can deduce that the perp, who was indeed of Vonarian height, stood right about *here* in relation to the victim—" He moved two steps forward, held one forefinger just behind the bright yellow coal, pointing like a gun. "The victim knelt down right—"

HE HEARD A LITTLE MEW, A couple of hasty breaths. The bedroom door was wrenched open, flooding the room with the blinding sunlight from the other rooms, then slammed shut again. Four seconds later he heard the front door of the quarters open and slam shut.

Ramant blinked to get his eyes readjusted. *Odd. She wasn't squeamish in the morgue.*

He twiddled a few adjustments on his imager to get the disruptor's signature trace as defined as possible, then quickly plugged in the holo-camera and recorded the trace for later scrutiny. As he dumped the equipment back in his tools pouch and headed for the roomlight control, he noticed a slight, stringlike glow floating horizontally about shin-height off the floor. It winked out as the signature trace faded and died, but Ramant kept his eyes aimed at where it had been as he dialed up the light.

He was looking at the edge of the mattress.

He would have preferred to ponder a few options, but he wanted more to investigate this before Boë D'Hesh recovered from her attack of sensitivity and returned.

He took his best guess: The secondary glow had been a resonance reflection from some holopic on, in, or under the mattress, which laid ever so slightly askew. Dodging the execution site, he quickly moved to the bed, grabbed the mattress, and lifted. Vonarians liked airpocket mattresses that overlaid hard bedtables. The long flat table was unremarkable. Meant to hold a mattress. So what.

"So what, indeed," Ramant whispered. "I know what was hidden under *my* mattress when I was nineteen." Holding up the mattress with one hand, he stretched the other toward the ostensibly bare

surface of the bedtable until his fingers disappeared—through the *holopic* of a bare bedtable actually lying there. Ramant's fingers probed enough to determine that a number of other flat things were hidden beneath the *holopic*. He grabbed an edge of one of them and lifted it through the *holopic*-bedtable-top, into the light.

A magazine. Blank red cover. Neat, flat plastic pages. Stamped colors, 2-D images, unchanging type. Always at one's fingertips in the privacy of one's bedroom or ship's lounge or, for that matter, grass hut. No need to log in to some biocomp resource *recorded* logs. No need for visits to cumuli deck libraries *recorded* visits. *Nope, that just wouldn't do.* Ramant flipped through gaudy pages of big breasts and spread legs and panting, painted lips. *Wouldn't do at all, for a Vonarian.*

He arranged the mattress back in place and shoved the magazine to the bottom of his tools pouch. Before leaving the apartment to find his partner, he sent the murdered spirit of poor "mutant" Op'tarmk one last thought. *You probably hadn't needed to be so elaborate. Boogymen only live under offworlder beds. Your sister-fellow Vonarians would never have thought to look there, holopic or no holopic.* But someone did think to tear through your bureau drawers, which the examination team, under orders to keep everything as they found it, conscientiously left in untidy jumbles.

Exiting Op'tarmk's quarters, Ramant opened the door into neighbor Chal Thiol Dem. The nosy gawker hadn't budged an inch, blocking the way of anyone trying to leave.

"Mister Ramant," Dem said, "excuse my forwardness, but I did not wish to, ah, fail to notice your departure." Her beautiful lips twisted slyly.

Ramant returned the sly smile. "You sound as though someone told you that murderer-trappers can just turn invisible at will."

"Silly, isn't it?"

"Totally unsubstantiated."

"Marn D'Hesh said te would be waiting by the meditation pond," Dem informed him. "I offered to pass the message."

"Thank you. And I'm glad you waited. I was curious: The moments after you found the body, I suppose, were quite hectic? People panicking, going through the victim's effects...."

She snorted. He interpreted it as *Vonarians are not given to "hectic."* She said, "There was consternation, of course. The doctor's presence helped preserve orderliness."

"Doctor Finciza? Interworld Plasm's lab physician?"

"Yes. Didn't I mention? Te was the visitor Iptim expected. Te arrived just seconds after myself." The Vonarian's slightly too large, almond shaped eyes had already searched Ramant's hands, then contemplated the closed tools pouch. "Did you find any hanging clues? *Bail*, isn't that what you call them? That is what trappers are renowned for, are they not?"

Ramant glanced back at the door. The official security lock had reset and activated. "Yes, indeed," he said, without elaborating on which of her questions he had answered.

YOU DON'T HAVE TO TAG ALONG. I'll give you a complete report tomorrow morning."

"I'm quite all right." Boë D'Hesh gave him an end-of-discussion tone and refused to look at him as she shoveled in forkfuls of supper.

They finished their steak-and-callamish (or what substituted for it on Vonar) and ordered a couple of cups of hot, strong ferth. Ramant was feeling the

drain of an unexpected trip and a lot of chasing around. He studied his companion. Though still pale, she'd had no problem packing away twice the volume of food he did, and he'd been starved. Guess they're emotionally detached from their stomachs, he thought.

He tried again. "I'm interested as to why you sealed the lab. I'm glad you did, but frankly I'm wondering why you felt it necessary, in terms of the investigation. Something there amiss?"

"Nothing was amiss. As I've explained, Vonarians are defined by their work. What Iptim Op'tarmk was, tes motivations and ambitions, would be indicated as much by tes lab activities as by tes home life."

"Contact all her lab associates and have them meet us there." Ramant signaled for the waiter, one of the toothy natives of Gondolyte Three, and got a refill. "Good ferth," he said to Boë. She did not reply. "I assume that Interworld Plasm has its own transport dock. Import-export business and all that?"

She finally looked at him. Her large, beautiful tan-gold eyes narrowed. "Of course. Why is that important to us?"

"Just establishing opportunity. Maybe Op'tarmk had her—tes—own import-export business. Access to private transport captains would be real handy."

The eyes stayed narrowed. "Import and export of what?"

"She made mashes that altered basic plasm genomes." He shrugged. "Who knows what Vonarian F-I mashes a guy might find useful in the black market?" He downed his second cup. "Let's go. Time's a-wastin'."

Interworld Plasm seemed a lot like the med facility morgue. Vonarians had a thing for white walls, smocks, and lengthy inspections of credentials. The watchdog this time was Iptim Op'tarmk's lab technician, a Marn Meecha Mot. Nice memorable, alliterative name, Ramant thought. The summoned lab personnel, hands in smock pockets or crossed over chests, waited politely outside of the wide lab entrance. He had technician Mot usher him and Boë into the sprawling laboratory. It featured row upon row of workbenches, water taps, reagent vessels and jars, walls lined with biocomps, bags of plasm feed stacked near vats in the rear, and other trappings of plasm research workshops.

"Here is Marn Op'tarmk's station," said the technician—Vonarians *all* seemed to be technicians—who had that same elusive beauty (and that same knack of generating little jolts of electricity) as Boë D'Hesh.

Ramant gave himself a brief psychic shake to dislodge Vonarian pheromones-or-whatever from his concentration. "Marn Mot, you worked as close as anybody to Iptim Op'tarmk?"

"Yes. I prepare the plasm culture, do data entry, other basic but essential tasks." She didn't appear guarded.

"You perform experiments?"

Still no elusiveness. "As an assistant. Clean-up, reference searches, procure aides as needed—" She glanced toward the knot of gaping lab workers. A flicker of annoyance drew down her brows.

"I understand that Op'tarmk put in her usual work time the day she was killed?"

Mot's brows now wrinkled; she sent a puzzled glance Boë's way.

He tried again. "Has the lab been used in the last two days?"

"No," replied the tech. "Until Vonarian Internal Affairs gives clearance, I allow no one in."

"Good girl." Ramant tried to pat her arm.

She flinched away from him and glared. "You will *not* refer to me by genderized epithets," she hissed. She flashed a horrified glance at the staffers in the entranceway. "*Especially* in front of other Vonarians!"

He blinked, amazed. Well, well. Anger. Outrage. *Passion*. Which of *those* can kill a person?

"Wait here," Boë snapped to the tech, and took Ramant's arm. They walked down the aisle to a slowly undulating vat of plasm. She explained, "The technician did not know to whom you referred. 'Her work time.' 'The day *she* was killed.' I realize it is difficult for mono-genders to speak of us. 'Girl.' 'Beautiful.' 'Handsome.' 'Fella.'" Boë D'Hesh made a helpless gesture. "I am usually indifferent to it."

Some of us have not had very extensive contact with moan—er, offworlders. I apologize for tes outburst.”

He shifted the tools pouch uncomfortably and studied the plasm. It seemed a gigantic loaf of eagerly rising bread, about to transmute into an independent life form, which, in a way, it was. “I’m sorry too,” he said. “I’ve been inconsiderate. It’s just that—well, you see me as I am. But I see all of you as women.”

She (and Boë would always be *she*, to him) nodded. “Which is why I must be te who bends.”

He eyed her speculatively. “Why did Vonarians breed that into themselves? I mean, there is no way I see you as genderless or gender-neutral. I know every man like me sees you the same way. Why can’t we see you as, well, hermaphroditic? Or is the right term androgynous?”

“It was an unanticipated effect. I can only explain it as the same psychomechanistic stimulus that has us seeing one another as ungended. Or perhaps third-gended. I *can* recognize you as a

Technician Mot punched another reference code that called up a holopic of a plant almost torn off its trellis by its load of fruit. “Inducing heavy pollen production in one strain and pistillate flowers in the other greatly enhances total fruit production, more than offsetting the loss of a crop on the pollen strain.”

Ramant stared at a pollen-dripping flower. No longer hermaphroditic. A *boy* plant. *They manipulate sex, even of plants...*

“Mister Ramant,” Boë added, “my investigators went over all this thoroughly. Op’tarmk’s research was good, it was useful, it was profitable. In no way would it bring tes life to *that* kind of end. In fact, I would like to allow this lab to continue with crop F-I research. *When* you are finished with your investigation?”

Ramant’s gaze was abruptly pulled toward the gawkers outside the entryway—over a dozen, politely attentive to the investigation’s goings-on. Did he just glimpse non-Vonarians for a moment? Finally he looked back at Boë’s oversized eyes, now tired and impatient.

She flinched away from him and glared. “You will by genderized epithets,” she hissed. She flashed a staffers in the entranceway. “Especially in front of

man, Mister Ramant. I could recognize, say, our hotel steward this morning as a woman. But unlike you, I can also see Vonarians as...else.” She straightened, closed her eyes wearily, and sighed. “What I *can’t* see is one Vonarian killing another. In Op’tarmk’s bedroom, when you so vividly re-created the moment of the murder... Can we get on with our business?”

The technician, now subdued if not repentant, was called upon to give an explanation of Op’tarmk’s equipment and goals, and to upload the research logbooks after Boë inputted the biocomp’s unlock codes. Ramant was familiar with labs, even esoteric experimental-plasm test sites; he needed only a cursory look-see to recognize that all was in neat, tidy, productive Vonarian order. He was even familiar with the spreadsheet in the lab’s biocomp records. With the technician and Boë hovering over his shoulders, he bounced efficiently through the murder victim’s logs.

“Op’tarmk certainly liked working on ‘jawnk seeds.’ What’s jawnk?” he asked the technician.

“A dioecious tropical vine yielding a fleshy fruit. Very sweet. We’ve hybridized it into an export crop that’s much in demand.”

Ramant punched for an image reference, finally recognizing it as the same plant he’d seen on Op’tarmk’s home biocomp. “Dioecious, you say. That means separate sexes. But this holo shows that both male *and* female vines bear fruit. Different kinds of fruits.” He looked up at Boë for elucidation. “You’re the expert on weird gender. How does a male plant bear fruit?”

“Mister Ramant,” she replied, not meeting the tech’s glance, “it’s just a plant. It would be less confusing if we called them ‘strain one’ and ‘strain two.’ The two wild forms must cross-pollinate, but both bear fruit, which are distinctive after their parent type. True hermaphroditism, actually. All Iptim Op’tarmk researched was an F-I mash—formation induction, remember?—to increase productivity in this crop. It is a task commonly assigned to new plasm engineers.”

“I see.” He flicked through several more note files. Each accessed a picture of the new, improved crop. But was it improved? Ramant flicked a little faster. “She—sorry, te—wasn’t having much luck, was she? Look at all the flower sacs on this variation. But this later pic shows almost no fruit developed from it.”

“Yes, of course. I think I’ve got all I want here.” He casually turned to the biocomp and asked it for a complete download of Op’tarmk’s log. Boë’s Vonarian Internal Affairs access codes still had it opened for those kinds of requests.

The technician sucked a breath, eyes wide. “That’s restricted-access data!”

Boë D’Hesh scowled as a cumuli deck formed and ejected into Ramant’s waiting hand. The deck disappeared into the tools pouch.

“You *do* authorize it, don’t you?” he asked, noting her displeasure and the tech’s shock.

“It must be for your eyes only. I assume you’ll tell me why you have this sudden interest in plant breeding?”

“Just want to brush up on formation induction. We never know where a certain seemingly insignificant *clue* will be hiding, do we?” He didn’t have to say *hanging* clue; he suspected that both Vonarians supplied it themselves. Perhaps, he thought, that aphorism was getting a little worn.

As they turned to leave, he directed his partner’s attention to the tidy, clean lab bench. “You know, given the data Op’tarmk accumulated, I’m surprised that bench isn’t overflowing with dishes of geneplasm being altered into F-I mashes. I assume your investigation team left everything as it was, like they did in Op’tarmk’s quarters?”

Boë glanced at the clean bench. “The plasm was placed back in the vat, where it could be fed. You wouldn’t leave research animals out to suffer and starve, would you?”

He paused thoughtfully. “Returning mash plasm to the culture vat destroys all traces of their new genetic codons, doesn’t it?”

“The tissue would all revert to an amorphous state,” the other Vonarian said clinically. “That way there is no fear of contamination from one project to the next.”

“I see.”

As they left the lab he surreptitiously looked for the non-Vonarians he thought he’d glimpsed earlier. The staffers now all appeared Vonarian. Typical tall, young, gorgeous, cookie-cutter variations on a type. One reminded him of the nosy neighbor Chal Thiol Dem. Two others he thought stuck out as being, well, maybe a little *homely*, in a darling, beautiful way. He interviewed them

briefly—making them wonder why they'd been summoned in the first place—and heard nothing useful. All had home or work alibis that Boë's team already verified. Irascible Marn Mot and nine other lab cohorts had been enduring a social mixer thrown to woo, God forbid, offworlder clients of Interworld Plasm. Everyone was accounted for.

No, he realized, that's not quite right. At the moment someone's finger pulled a disruptor trigger, where was Boë?

RAMANT AND HIS LIAISON LEFT INTERWORLD PLASM EXPORT laboratories and walked through the night toward the private dock. "Boë," he asked, as they reached their waiting aircar, "how did Internal Affairs come to put you in charge of the investigation?"

"Actually, I asked to be the liaison."

He paused. "You did?"

"Mister Ramant, you exasperate me. Didn't you bother to peruse the report I sent to your biocomp? Internal Affairs agreed that

*not refer to me
horrified glance at the
other Vonarians!"*

because I was most familiar with Marn Op'tarmk's activities, I could better interface with the Heinous Crimes Investigator."

"Oh." After a moment: "You mean *research* activities."

"Yes, of course." As if there were any other kind.

"But, unless she was experimenting on herself, which the autopsy's biochemical evaluation would have caught—" he paused for affirmation.

"True."

"—It appears that Op'tarmk's research had nothing to do with her death."

"So it appears," Boë admitted: "However, as I've explained," (ad nauseum, Ramant thought) "a Vonarian's work has everything to do with *tes* life. Because I knew Op'tarmk's work, I knew *ter* in other ways, even if only by implication. And *tes* research implies a very thorough, very bright, very—enterprising—individual whose sole concern was to get as much fecundity as possible from jawnk plants. In fact, I was reviewing *tes* work last night—as part of my job duties, understand—at the very moment *te* was killed. And to anticipate your next question, yes, in order to avoid all hint of influence, I always review lab workers' research logs after hours, and all alone."

RAMANT THE MURDERER-TRAPPER WAITED IN HIS DARKENED HOTEL room. He stood in the darker shadows near an inside wall, letting a thirty-percent-opaqué window seep in silver starlight from Vonar's bright midnight sky. He did not so much as glance at a partially opened drawer, or the wardrobe curtain ajar, nor the bulk on the bed that was supposed to imitate his sleeping self. He watched instead the room door, which at the moment was taking its sweet time opening, allowing a heavy-bodied figure through, and closing again. The figure's head, a dark mass in the gloom, was enlarged beyond natural proportions and Ramant assumed his clandestine visitor was wearing a dark-sensor helmet—one now reading infrared emanations that said a human slept in the bed, rather than a few pillows and a little triangulating holosender, which had been talking to its partners in the drawer and in the wardrobe for the last two hours. The dark helmet looked right, left, straight at the flesh-and-blood Ramant without

reaction, then raised a shadow arm in the darkness. Ramant closed his eyes so the disruptor beam wouldn't blind him. He listened to the instant of lethal sizzling, and the slightly longer moment of shrieking as the triangulation equipment reflected the beam back to its sender.

The room illumination went up simultaneously with the sounding of an alarm klaxon. At once, before hotel aides could rush in, Ramant ran to the still-helmeted corpse and pulled down its pants.

HE'S WEARING A DISRUPTION shield." Boë D'Hesh tried to remove the would-be assassin's helmet carefully, if not gracefully. When that didn't work, she put her Vonarian muscles to the task. Fortunately, the disruptor beam had hit the man in the middle of his chest, sending his heart and its major vessels into sub-tau limbo, leaving very little of nearby frying molecules to steam all the way up what was left of the trachea. A bearded face emerged unscathed.

Ramant bent down. "We've seen this guy. He piloted our taxi from the port-of-entry!"

Boë examined the helmet. "This is a rather sophisticated piece of equipment. So is his disruptor. Neither item, by the way, is readily available on Vonar for any purpose other than those thoroughly documented and authorized."

"Well, enter it in the license network anyhow. I doubt if you'll trace the helmet, but I'll give you ten to one that disruptor's signature trace matches the one in Op'tarmk's bedroom." Ramant thumb-locked a recorder handed to him by one of three Internal Affairs people whom Boë had allowed into the room. The lock would prevent access to details of the crime scene by anyone who didn't ask him for permission first. Enough public information floated around Vonar. He knew that big-eared hotel staff were busy adding to its volume.

He turned to Doctor Finciza, who had again filled a coroner's role at Boë's request. She'd conducted a ten-minute examination of the body—which had its pants hiked back up by the time anyone had arrived—concerned herself mightily over the empty hole lodged in the perp's chest, and finally pronounced him dead. "Take him to the same stasis morgue you got Iptim Op'tarmk froze up in," Ramant ordered, "and do not examine the body or conduct an autopsy until I order it. Understand?"

Finciza lifted an easily read eyebrow: *Of course I understand, you insufferable offworlder blockhead.* "Yes, Mister Ramant."

As soon as the gurney and its entourage departed, Boë shut and latched the room door, cranked the air purification all the way up, and turned back to Ramant. "How did you know?" she demanded, pointing to the pieces of triangulation equipment poking from bed, drawer and wardrobe, all with slight scorch marks in their immediate vicinity.

He nodded with approval. She'd eyeballed the stuff and knew what it was, and what it was for. "All day long people asked me if I had the 'hanging' clue. I never have to say yes or no. Murderers must assume that I do. They simply forget who they're dealing with." He gave Boë a look to remind her that he was, after all, still the murderer-trapper, and had a well-deserved reputation of which she knew only the few unclassified parts. "A trapper baits. The prey freely walks into the trap."

"The taxi pilot. I cannot imagine how he fits into this."

"I can. He was assigned to pick me up at the port-of-entry. Since my arrival was public information, he had no trouble being at the right place at the right time. That gave him the name of my hotel. It was preparation in case someone felt the need for a *private session* with me."

Boë D'Hesh's cheeks heated. "And by inference, I and my Vonarian associates are too naive to know how to guard the Throne's Heinous Crimes Investigator."

"Don't be sarcastic. I don't expect anyone to concern themselves over *my* safety. And I have full confidence in your ability to trace Mister Taxi Pilot and learn all you can about him and his contacts. You can start now, if you like—" he yawned, "but I'm going to get some sleep. It's been a long day. And night." He started collecting a few personal items and tossed them in his still-packed tools pouch. He'd been assigned the room opposite until the latest crime scene could be opened for the cleaning staff.

"We would have learned more from a living prisoner, I should think. Why such a lethal trap?"

"The trap was calibrated to return a stun charge. It cuts out as soon as the perp goes down or any disruption shield overloads. You'll find that our man's shield had been reversed. Instead of protecting, it *enhanced* the charge." He headed out the door. "Our pilot, or more likely whoever put him up to this, prepared for an all-or-nothing mission."

Boë hesitated. "Why did you put a hold on the assassin's autopsy? Is this another new investigation technique?"

"I want to be present." He also wanted to see if he could flush more volunteers for Vonar's oddballs morgue. Doctor Finciza had labeled Iptim Op'tarmk a mutant. That personage, however, wasn't as mutant in Ramant's book as a big, hairy, taxi-piloting offworlder *man*, who also possessed a vagina.

HE WATCHED BOE D'HESH ENTER THE HOTEL RESTAURANT, CIRCLE THE breakfast buffet while searching the tables, and finally spot his. Her long all-business strides stopped short. He waved her over and gestured to his breakfast companion.

"Marn D'Hesh, you remember Miss Arrow Of Lights, our hotel steward, of course?"

"Of course." Boë nodded at the smaller woman.

"Hi, handsome," said Arrow, returning a flirting smile.

The Vonarian flicked an icy eye to Ramant. "I should like to discuss some important news regarding our case."

Get rid of the baggage, Ramant translated. He toyed with asking her to sit down and join them for breakfast while she proffered her news, which he already guessed: The cabbie's home or taxi or gym locker coughed up some very incriminating evidence that revealed him as Iptim Op'tarmk's murderer. If she had anything else, he'd turn in his resignation tomorrow.

He gave Arrow Of Lights a smile. "Actually, Boë, I've just invited Miss Of Lights to accompany us today." He watched Boë's mouth *drop open*, but continued before she stuck her foot in it. "I thought an outside opinion might lend some refreshing insight. Think of it as unorthodox procedure."

The Vonarian digested that. "Very well. I am looking forward to the day, Miss Of Lights," she said graciously. "May I speak with you privately for just a moment, Mister Ramant?"

"Ah. The news." He excused himself and followed Boë to a secluded alcove off the lobby.

"We've searched the cabbie's quarters and personal effects. His taxi had a hidden compartment in which we found a sensor-echo belt and several injectors of Iptim Op'tarmk's F-I mash jawnk plasm." She waited for his response. "You were right about the disruptor. It was the murder weapon," she added, perplexed at his reaction.

He nodded with mild interest. "I see. So the sensor-echo belt fooled Marn Op'tarmk's home monitors into recording our cabbie as a Vonarian visitor, and he killed Op'tarmk for the formation-induction formula, which would bring him wealth in the jawnk-fruit black market."

"It could certainly be so interpreted. I don't understand your lack

of enthusiasm, Mister Ramant."

He gave her a speculative look. "Just wraps the case right up, does it not? The murderer willingly comes forth to the trapper's noose. I like it when it's that easy."

"Personally, I find it just a little pat, as your kind say. Are you going to accept it at face value?"

His only answer was a slow-growing smile. "Come on now, we're being rude to Miss Of Lights."

Trailing a speechless Boë D'Hesh, Ramant gave the short and stocky hotel steward his arm and they headed for the carport. The first stop was the medical facility, and only then did the Vonarian open her mouth.

"You aren't going to take her in to see the corpses, are you?" she hissed in Ramant's ear.

"No, no. I simply thought she'd like to meet the delightful Vonarians I've met on my visit to your lovely world. I called our personal physician and—Ah—here she comes now."

As expected, Doctor Finciza hurried to intercept any potential visitors to her sacrosanct morgue with its shameful mutant. "I'm afraid non-professionals are strictly forbidden in the stasis locker," the doctor said nervously.

"I quite understand. Doctor Finciza, this is my assistant, Miss Arrow Of Lights."

Arrow smiled pleasantly. "I'm charmed, Doctor. Are you taking on new patients, by any chance?" The smile did not diminish. In fact, it could have blinded passers-by. Interworld Plasm's health officer cringed.

Ramant took pity on her. "Thank you, Doctor. But that's all I wanted here." He escorted Boë and Arrow out, followed by Finciza's quizzical stare.

The next stop was Iptim Op'tarmk's garden apartment complex. He checked Boë from heading to the murder victim's quarters and herded them to the nosy neighbor's place. Chal Thiol Dem still worked in her own quarters, and still, evidently, watched from the windows. She opened the door before Ramant could ring the announcer.

"Have you come to search *my* bedroom now, Trapper Ramant?" Dem said, her tenor voice lower than Boë's or other Vonarians. He hadn't noticed it quite so much yesterday. He focused. Chal Thiol Dem was still very female, beautiful, and Vonarian. Still with that aura of *he* about her. It didn't distract Ramant from hearing "bedroom," however. Dem was familiar with where the action was.

"Marn Dem, I simply wanted to thank you for your cooperation yesterday. By the way, this is my friend, Arrow Of Lights."

Arrow beamed. "Very glad to meet you, Mister Dem."

"We'll be on our way now. Sorry to disturb you."

This time Dem's stare followed them out.

And on to Interworld Plasm Export Labs. Trailing a now-wholly bewildered Boë D'Hesh, Ramant introduced Arrow Of Lights to the touchy technician Meecha Mot, then to the rest of the staff, including the homely ones. The lab had been given a green light to resume interrupted research projects. "I can't tell you how pleased I've been with your cooperation," he announced to the lab workers, whom he'd gathered around in a circle. He nodded farewell to Boë. "You want to get things back on track here, so Arrow and I will leave now. But be sure to join me at my hotel room tonight for my final report." He held a finger to his lips and winked conspicuously at her blank expression. "I'm inviting some folks who are very knowledgeable in the sexual transmutation of jawnk plants."

The circle of befuddled Vonarians watched him go.

HUSHED VOICES ISSUED FROM A SECLUDED HOTEL RESTAURANT BOOTH. None of the infrequent passers-by gave a moment's thought to an off-duty steward enjoying her lunch. From the corner of a disinterested eye, she appeared alone; however, even a direct inspection would have revealed nothing more remarkable than two short offworlders having a pleasant chat.

"The cabbie?"

"A familiar sight at this hotel, Mister Ramant. Hairy old bastard from somewhere in the Cluster proper."

"Interworld Plasm's Doctor Finciza?"

"Very handsome gentleman. Every girl's dream of a personal doctor. I get all puckery just *thinking* of—"

"Arrow, let's stick to business, please."

"Yes, sir. Sorry. I still forget my 'te's' and 'marn's' and all that if I don't watch myself. Go on."

"Your first impression of Chal Thiol Dem, the victim's neighbor?"

"Oh, my, a *real* man! Makes other Vonarians look like pale schoolboys."

"Dem is *more* of a man to you than, say, uh, Boë D'Hesh?"

"Marn D'Hesh, he's a doll. Don't get me wrong, Mister Ramant. Dem's more, well, can I say unpolished? It's hard to compare. I love ebony skin, I guess."

"Wait. Dem has fair skin."

"Oh, josh. Next you'll be telling me Boë D'Hesh doesn't have those beautiful sea-green eyes of his."

"She does? Are you sure—oh, never mind. The laboratory workers. All gorgeous guys there?"

"Uh—"

"Yes? The technician Meecha Mot?"

"Lovely gentleman. A bit distant, but so many are, you know. They have this offworlder thing."

"The others?"

"Inspiring to a girl's vision, if you get my meaning. The most of them. One was as fine a specimen of manhood as Marn Dem. But I'll tell you, Mister Ramant, two of those were, well, I hate to say it, but..."

"Your honest opinion, Arrow. Two were what? Homely?"

"*Girls*. They were *girls*, Mister Ramant."

HE FINISHED LACING HIS CLEAN shirt and ran fingers through his shower-damp hair as he strode to answer a knock on his hotel room door.

"Boë, come in."

The Vonarian entered. She was dressed in her usual tan jumpsuit, but wore a light jacket over it. The color, Ramant pointedly noted, matched her tan-gold eyes. He considered the jacket momentarily. The evening

was still warm. Evidently, he thought, she needed pockets for something more substantial than taxi fare. The left pocket held a moderate weight. Something about the heft of a palm disruptor.

"I hope you're going to explain our morning, Mister Ramant." She spotted his packed effects bag. "You're leaving? You haven't filed your final report as yet."

"Have a chair." Leaving the door ajar, he waved toward the glassite-topped table in the middle of the room. A thin, dog-eared magazine with a blank red cover lay on it.

Boë headed for the indicated chair. She watched him daub hotel cologne behind his ears, then she curiously plucked at the strange magazine, lifting the cover. Turning a page. Froze in disbelief, then withdrew her hand as though from a bonfire. "Pornography! Surely it's not—"

"Mine? Oh, no. Would you believe it? I found it in Iptim Op'tarmk's bedroom. I believe *she* would have called it erotica." He tucked the cologne bottle in his effects bag's side pouch. "Boë," he began, taking a chair beside her, steeping his fingers, cracking his knuckles, "you didn't hire me just to solve a murder. I was to reveal a conspiracy, and the conspirators for you as well."

Her mouth dropped open, but her denial died before finding voice. She had come to know him better than that. "When did you realize?" she asked softly.

"First suspicion? Right at the port-of-entry. I'll get into that later. Now, correct me where I'm wrong. You discovered the F-I plasm scam Op'tarmk was running, after you started to notice something a little *odd* about several of your lab workers." He watched her debate whether to spill all or not. "Jawnk plants. Op'tarmk adds a little plasm magic here, she gets boy flowers. Adds a little plasm magic there, she gets girl flowers. But she didn't limit it to flowers, did she?"

Boë whispered, "I didn't kill Iptim Op'tarmk."

He waved that aside. "Boë, you're too bright not to have detected the sex-change enterprise at least as easily as I did—and besides, it's your job. You discovered Op'tarmk marketing a plasm that promised bisexual delights. You warned her to stop. You tried to destroy all data for the illicit activity, keeping only the legitimate plant research. But you had to expose the collaborators. And for that you needed the help of an outside, confidential, professional investigator."

She hesitated for a long moment. "I never detected the change in Op'tarmk. But yes, I came to...*sense* something different about certain newer staff. I eventually perceived a monogender look about them. Like you, it didn't take me long to divine the gist of certain clandestine experiments going on in my lab. Hints in the logs, suggestions of a black market operation, unnecessary trials with plasm. It meant trouble for Interworld Plasm Export, but it was especially distressing for...the ethics of Vonar." She'd been studying the magazine's plain red cover; now she looked up. "The experimenter could have been any staffer. I didn't realize who until Op'tarmk was murdered. I wasn't working late that night. I was at home. As soon as I heard, I went to the lab to destroy all the suspicious data. I discovered that someone had been there before me."

"I apologize for withholding, Ramant. It was a matter of internal Vonarian security and a simple lack of any convincing hard evidence. I was truly hoping that the taxi driver *was* the murderer. He wasn't, was he?"

Ramant turned to another knock on door. "Come in."

Observant neighbor Chal Thiol Dem walked in with a cautious stride. She studied the room with a gaze that visibly worked to appear nonchalant, especially when it fell on the red-covered magazine on the table. "Mister Ramant," she greeted politely. "Marn D'Hesh, you look a bit indisposed tonight."

"Right on time," Ramant said, waving the new guest in. "I'm so glad."

Dem's nonchalance wavered. "You clearly specified the time at which I was to arrive."

"I did, didn't I? Have a chair." He offered his. "Now we can commence with business."

She remained standing. "What business?"

"I have to trap a murderer."

The Vonarian gasped. "But—I thought—the news is all over that you'd caught some taxi pilot!"

"Really, Marn Dem, setting him up like that was very cold-blooded of you. What did you tell him? That a measly twirp like me couldn't possibly be a real trapper? That I was just some nosy bureaucrat and he had more than ice's chance in hell of actually frying me while I slept? Or perhaps you'd planned for the poor bastard to hang for *two* murders."

"No," she stammered, her stunned gaze unwavering on him. "Not true—"

"Hold on." He retook his ignored seat at the glass table. "I have to get this out before our third guest arrives. Chal Thiol Dem, I believe *you* hired the assassin, because a *true* Vonarian would not stoop to conspiring with a moaner, much less be on such familiar terms as to engage one as a hit man, and I don't believe you started life as a true Vonarian. He was your illicit plasm-runner, wasn't he? Or perhaps your brother?"

Boë caught her breath at the blasphemy.

Dem failed to notice it. "True' Vonarian—?"

"He carried the murder weapon, Dem. He either got it from the real murderer, or he got it from whoever found it at the scene of the crime. And only the first person there would have been able to pick up such an important item unobserved."

"I didn't murder anyone!"

Ramant tapped his neck under an ear. "Did you give Op'tarmk that hickey?"

A third knock struck lightly on the door.

"Come in, Doctor," Ramant called.

AS TENTATIVELY AS SHE'D knocked, Interworld Plasm Export's Doctor Finciza inched around the door. Ramant beckoned her to join their company. She froze before she was more than halfway, her eyes fastened to what was on the table. Chal Thiol Dem reacted too slowly to keep the words from spilling from the physician's mouth.

"Good God! How did you get *that*?"

"Doctor!" Dem rasped.

Ramant noticed that the good doctor, as Vonarians seemed to be wont, had left the door ajar—the way she'd found it. He said loudly and cheerfully, "Doctor, I have a medical question." Catching the physician's uneasy attention, he continued, "I looked at the corpse of Iptim Op'tarmk, I looked at the corpse of our taxi pilot, I looked at a whole bunch of live people who insisted on involving themselves one way or another, and I looked at jawnk plants. Know what they all had in common?"

Finciza, mouth sagging, shook her head a tiny bit.

"Sex. I mean *real* sex. Boy or girl sex. Boy *and* girl sex. But *not* Vonarian." He snatched up the magazine. He flipped the featureless cover; vivid pornographic images fluttered past the doctor's appalled eyes. "Why do you suppose Iptim collected this stuff? A Vonarian should never want it. Need it. Like it. *Use* it. Unless she isn't quite Vonarian any more." He looked pointedly at his other two guests, then said slowly, "Doctor Finciza, by your own admission you never, save for that one night, visited Iptim's apartment. Why did you *recognize this* for what it was the instant you laid eyes on it? While it just sat innocently on my table here, under an *unmarked* cover?"

"You incredible fool," murmured Dem, glaring at the physician.

Finciza's shoulders slumped. Her eyes lost their wide look of perplexed shock, narrowed, and grew cold as her morgue. She nodded toward the magazine. "Bait in your trap. For me. I recognized Iptim's filth, and that put me in *tes* bedroom."

"It wasn't just the magazine," Ramant corrected. "It was the matter of Vonarian rationality. You said Op'tarmk came to you out of fear over threats. But it's irrational for a Vonarian to come to a *physician* for anything but *physical* problems. If Op'tarmk was scared by something, I'd wager it was her ballooning libido. She was turning into a *moaner*, wasn't she, Doctor?"

The Vonarian lurched a step forward. "Yes!" she hissed, teeth bared with revulsion.

"And you falsified the autopsy to hide the presence of F-I plasm in her system."

The doctor glanced at Chal Thiol Dem.

Dem grabbed Finciza's arm with enough force to stagger the taller Vonarian. "Keep your mouth shut!"

"Let's allow the doctor to explain things." Boë D'Hesh rose. Her hand shot meaningfully into her bulging jacket pocket and hid there. Dem went ashen and froze in her tracks.

"How did you guess, Trapper Ramant?" the doctor said, with something like relief.

"It was a matter of seeing things. For example, I see you and all Vonarians as female. Someone like our Miss Arrow Of Lights, of course, sees you as male. But then I started to see Vonarians as just a little bit masculine. Or just a little bit ugly. I thought, that can't be right. That's *imperfection*. So I asked the delightful Miss Of Lights to assist my vision from her own indubitably female perspective."

"Your visitations with her this morning."

He nodded. "You, Doctor, are a handsome man to Arrow, and a beautiful woman to me. Same holds for you, Boë. On the other hand, Op'tarmk's nosy neighbor here appears a little bit manly to me. No offense. You are a superman to Miss Of Lights. There is another mannish 'Vonarian' working at Op'tarmk's lab, and two who appeared as females to both myself *and* Arrow. They may have fooled room sensors, but the taint of their *original* gender still gave them away to those of us who looked for it." He gave a

*Like you, it didn't take me
experiments going on in
market operation, unneces*

shrug of nonconcern. "You'll be pleased to know, Doctor, that I personally found all of these 'mutants' less attractive than true Vonarians such as yourself."

"Understandable," Finciza murmured.

"Now, I assume that the F-I mash Op'tarmk developed to make jawnk plants either supermales or superfemales was working fairly well to elevate ordinary humans like Dem and the lab workers to a lofty state of Vonardom. The question is, why would Iptim Op'tarmk lower herself to a state of single gender?"

The doctor stood as though turned to stone for a heartbeat. Then she shot out a hand at Chal Thiol Dem with a savage violence. "They were commonplace *moaners*! Iptim gave them a chance for *transcendence*!"

Ramant focused on her. "But they didn't agree to the change simply because they aspired to be perfect Vonarians."

"No. They believed the myths about orgies and other absurdities. They wanted bisexuality. *Doubled* sexuality. Iptim couldn't understand it either. *Te* was a good scientist. *Te* ran the complementary experiment—on *terself*. Pure scientific exploration of one-sex-ness. *Te* would try first one gender, then the other. *Te* confessed to me that *te* got the moaners to assist. And then...."

"And then she understood."

"Yes. Offworlders addicted Iptim to their perverted sexuality. Gave *ter* the printed magazines 'for study'—I'd like to know where you found this one, by the way. I tore that bedroom apart looking for contraband and plasm vials, and anything else puerile and offensive—" She shuddered.

"Don't!" Dem whispered desperately, glancing at Boë, Ramant, the door.

Doctor Finciza glared at her. "This monster was not first at the scene. The alarm went off just as I arrived at Iptim's quarters. *Te* had confided in me about threats. I ran in to find that *tes* tormenter, whoever it was, had just made good on them. Right or

wrong, I made a hasty decision. I had come to propose ways of reversing the plasm effects. Now it was too late for that, but I felt that Iptim's work had begun with honorable intentions, and I could at least shield the few remaining scraps of tes respectability. The disruptor lay on the floor. I threw it in my medical case, then collected any evidence of perversion I saw lying around the room. No time for a thorough search. I thought if I ran out the back and circled around to come in the front again, after witnesses arrived, I could finish the task. But the only witness was Dem. And te had seen me run."

The doctor put a despairing hand over her face. "The alarm was shrieking, I had the disruptor and the moaner paraphernalia in my possession, and Dem was accusing me of murder!"

Dem appeared genuinely surprised. "Are you saying you *didn't* do it?"

"I *told* you I didn't!"

"But Dem didn't care one way or another," Ramant supplied, "when she promised to alibi for you in this revolting predicament." He studied the doctor's amazement. "If, of course, you would agree to turn your back while she destroyed all of Op'tarmk's home records. Those implicating Dem and the other metamorphosed

of that deviant experiment." Her lovely chin lifted toward her target. "I may have allowed it to continue, had it truly lifted the likes of you to Vonarian standards, Dem. But I can see that you have no interest in bettering yourself. And Doctor, I can also see you have no interest in salvaging any moral standards you may have once possessed. Neither of you is any more Vonarian than vat plasm. And less deserving to live."

"Marn Mot," Boë said quietly, "Put down your weapon. Please." She lifted both hands in appeal. The hand in her pocket had come out holding a warty purple fruit, one crumpled leaf stuck to its short stem.

"Soiling all we are, all we've strived to become by elevating ourselves out of monosex muck pits! Iptim would push us back in! I knew in my heart—I warned ter. Te had me conscript moaner volunteers. Four of them. After transformation, three were willing to work in the lab so we could track their progress. But this one, this scum Dem—you had other plans. You were planning to conscript your own 'volunteers,' sell the formula as a—a recreational drug!"

The oratory had to await a moment's re-establishment of composure. Ramant surmised that Dem had already been conscripting her own "volunteers," the taxi pilot, in the initial stages of trans-

long to divine the gist of certain clandestine my lab. Hints in the logs, suggestions of a black sary trials with plasm.

moaners in a black market sex-change plasm scam. And let me guess. She even offered to dispose of the incriminating evidence, right?"

The doctor exchanged murderous looks with her ex-ally. "Te blackmailed me to falsify the autopsy and cover up any suggestions that Iptim's appearance might have been induced by experimental mash created at Interworld Plasm Export."

"So *you* destroyed all the lab records," Boë declared.

Finciza's brow furrowed. "What?"

"I don't think either the good doctor or Dem could have gotten to the labs before you did that night, Boë," Ramant said calmly. "Ladies," he said to the Vonarians, spreading his palms to the unoccupied chairs, "won't you please sit down? You'd make much smaller targets."

Boë's turn to be confused. "But—if none of us committed the murder, nor destroyed the lab data—"

"That doesn't mean you are not guilty!" Meecha Mot stood in the doorway, a disruptor held in her two hands and leveled at Chal Thiol Dem.

THE DOCTOR, TOO DRAINED TO REACT, SIMPLY TURNED TO FACE THE savage accusation. Dem, already white-faced, gasped with the fear of sure death she saw in the lab tech's expression.

Ramant tensed and held his focus. He stayed rooted to the chair. "Ah. Marn Meecha Mot. Protectress of Vonarian virtue and purity." He hoped Boë wouldn't complicate things further with whatever she gripped in her jacket pocket. Amazing, he thought, the number of illegal disruptors that turn up in a society of harmonious, rational, superior intellects.

The alliterative Marn Meecha Mot twitched neither disruptor needle nor condemning gaze. "I thank you for trapping this polluting scum for me, Mister Ramant. I warned Iptim to shed tefself from such unwholesome involvements. And yes, I purged our biocomps

formation, among these.

Mot continued her purge of self-vindication. "I went to Iptim's quarters to plead for rationality. Te made a *pass* at me! *Me!* I knew I had no choice then. *Bondage.* Te was going to show me how *wonderful* it was. I let ter strip, and bound ter the way te insisted, te was as easily put off-guard as a moaner, I took out my handgun—I had no choice!" The disruptor had sagged an iota. It snapped to attention. "Just as I have none now!"

"Well, I guess I don't either, then," Ramant said.

"What—?" The Vonarian abruptly recoiled, blinked, looked back and forth, whirled. She pointed the disruptor at the table, at various points around the room, at the door, back at what she perceived, Ramant knew, as his suddenly empty chair. The three other Vonarians, Dem nearly panicked, bounced their gazes between Mot's crazed aiming and the room's emptiness where a Heinous Crimes Investigator should be, somewhere.

"Where are you?" Mot cried. "What did you *do*?"

"Marn Mot, are you planning on killing all of your volunteers?" His voice spread without a source.

She whirled around, looking for him. "Of course not! I will see the experiment to completion. If they fail to become fully Vonarian, I'll withhold the mash plasm. They will revert to common moaners and their destruction will then be as inconsequential as the death of *this* lowlife traitorous scum!"

Her jumpy searching for Ramant halted. The disruptor froze with deadly intent on the original target.

And on Boë D'Hesh. One step had placed her in front of the quaking Chal Thiol Dem.

Meecha Mot hesitated.

Arrow Of Lights walked in the still-open door.

The hotel steward didn't see Ramant, only the peculiar expressions on the three close-grouped Vonarians by the table, and the back of technician Mot. She addressed Boë. "Hi, handsome! I

saw Mister Ramant's door-registry announcing he'd left already, and—*Ay!*"

Mot's disruptor needle pointed down at her nose.

Ramant couldn't keep the chair from becoming seeable just before it smashed Mot's gun hand, but astonishment made her Vonarian reflexes sluggish.

IT WAS KEPT TOO QUIET, TOO IN-HOUSE, Boë." Ramant held up four fingers and began ticking off steps of logical deduction. Finger One: "It had to be someone from the lab, and out of your lab staff, Mot graciously volunteered to be my main suspect by showing herself possessed of passion. Didn't I mention passion as one of the main triggers for murder?" Second finger: "Since the doctor didn't even know what a hickey was, she certainly wasn't in on perverse sex acts, and thus lacked motive to cleanse the race, as it were. She could only shield Vonarian virtue after the fact, by medically proclaiming Iptim Op'tarmk no longer Vonarian." Finger three: "Dem, as one of the users of the plasm mash, wouldn't cut off her supplier. If Op'tarmk threatened to end the experiment and needed coercing, Dem preferred blackmail, as we've heard." Last finger: "And you cleared yourself, Boë, when you questioned the cabbie's 'obvious' guilt. The real murderer would have enthusiastically endorsed the planted evidence.

"Trapping that murderer," he concluded, "wasn't as difficult as orchestrating the confessions concerning your black market operations. Timing was everything. And that was a *damn* fool act of recklessness, Boë," Ramant scolded. "I was ready to take her out."

Dem, Mot, and the doctor had been escorted away by Vonarian Internal Affairs authorities, accompanied, courtesy of Ramant's summons, by representatives of the foreigners' constabulary, who knew a little more about escorting criminals.

Boë waved away his angry concern. "Marn Mot is true Vonarian. So am I. In tes eyes, Iptim had lost racial purity. But te could not have killed me."

"I wouldn't have bet the rent." He shot a finger at the warty purple orb on the table. "And using a jawnk fruit to get the drop on Dem!"

"It was meant as a farewell gift for you. And what I did wasn't half as brazen as using the three of us as *bait* in your trap for Mot!" She snorted contemptuously. "Why didn't you buy tes alibi? We had checked. Te *was* at the client mixer—for a while, at least."

"Sure. Who notices people coming and going at those things?"

"Speaking of coming and going..." she gave him a studious perusal, "Ramant, how did you do it? I know you have no holoprojection setup in this room."

"You have an eye for that," he acknowledged. "Just as you had an eye for me, at the port-of-entry."

"What does that have to do with you just—*vanishing*?"

"You and I are a lot alike, my dear. Your Vonarian psychic chemistry projects a subliminal holo-id that similar Vonarian brains see as appropriately inter-gender, but which moaner brains interpret as gender *perfection*. A sub-transplanar psychic projection enhanced to a degree that can shroud a corpse and even holocameras can capture. Me, on the other hand, I'm one of those dreary, unremarkable people who disappear in a not-very-crowded room. The wallflower. The potted plant at parties. The little voice that's never paid any attention in casual discussions. *My* projected image, other brains unconsciously

flick away like a lintball."

"That does *not* make us alike. In *any* way."

He shrugged. "You developed your inborn gift into Vonardom. I developed mine into a serviceable talent."

"And what's that got to do with my seeing you at the port-of-entry?"

"I wasn't going to walk down an open, public gangplank in plain view with a murderer afoot. I'm an easy target for someone who might object to murderer-trappers. So it's an instinct, you could say standard procedure, for me to disembark incognito, as it were. I suppose I wasn't working too hard at it—that effects bag was such a pain to carry—but you still detected me. Other Vonarians couldn't. It marked you for me right from the start. It took me a while to learn how you managed it."

"How?"

"You had recently become sensitive to unusual id projections. Ones that fooled sensors and other Vonarians into seeing transformed moaners as true citizens. Quite unconsciously, that same sensitivity unmasked me, too. When I wasn't trying too hard."

Boë D'Hesh jerked. Blinked rapidly. Squinted.

"Now I'm trying. Don't bother straining your eyesight."

She smiled a full, true smile and nodded to ostensibly empty air. "Good-bye, Mister Ramant. Peel the jawnk." She shut the door tightly behind herself.

He relaxed his focus and returned to his security biocomp. A transport schedule waited patiently on the monitor. He hesitated before making a reservation, instead walking to the bedroom door and peeking in.

ARROW OF LIGHTS SAT CROSS-legged on the bed, still-trembling fingers wrapped around a lukewarm cup of tea. "How are we doing?" he asked. She'd had to give her testimony to the Internal Affairs investigators, but she'd been so shaken that Ramant had insisted on a time-out.

She laughed. "I'm going to miss you, Ramant. I thought life on Vonar was exciting—until you came along."

Ramant noted the light of morning already graying at the windows. "You know, I could use a short vacation. Vonar is a lovely world."

"It was. Especially the Vonarians. Such handsome fellows. Now all I'm going to see are those mutant people. You know, I've lived and worked on Vonar for half my life, in a hotel to boot, and I still don't know what Vonarians *really* do for sex." She stood up, stretched, and accompanied him back into the outer room.

He patted her arm reassuringly. "The misguided Marn Meecha Mot was the only mutant. A Vonarian with a killer instinct."

Arrow nodded sadly. "I can't understand them. It's like they think sex is the root of all evil."

"What they've got to learn is that a person's humanity doesn't hinge on sexuality...say," Ramant said, squinting at the top of her head, "I believe you and I are exactly the same height."

Arrow's coarse, imperfect, warm features screwed into a wide smile. "Why, you're at least two fingers taller than me. I've *always* been a runt."

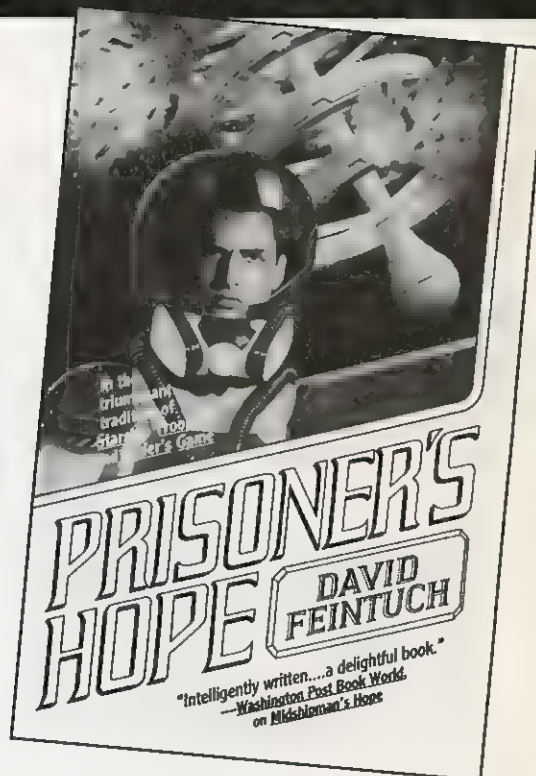
He smiled back. "Have breakfast with me, beautiful?"

"Thought you'd never ask, handsome." □

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WHERE IMAGINATION KNOWS NO BOUNDS





D E A D L Y

York Buildings
February 16, 1685

Sir —

I take it as my duty, as President of this Society, of which we both are Fellows, to answer your inquiry in full, that you might understand why all experiments concerning the transmission of blood from one creature to another must be forbidden, and most strongly when the practice involves men, although the experiments into these matters were once most promising, and might well have proven to be of good use to men and the betterment of their condition.

As you might know, I was admitted as a Fellow to the Society in 1665, when my Lord Bruckard was then President, and I thought it then a most acceptable thing to hear the discourse of such great and learned men who did assemble together at Gresham College, where we did then meet, and later at Arundell House, and to see their experiments, which were upon the nature of ayre, and fire, and many other matters of philosophie, but also on the nature of blood, which is of all the bodily humours the most vital.

And it was in the next year, after the great fire, when we did begin to meet weekly again, that the first experiments were performed on the transfusion of blood from one creature into another. But I find I cannot speak of these matters, but observing how well this enterprise began, in such a spirit of improving inquiry that I did mightily rejoice to see it done. I hope you will remember this when you have heard all the truth of these events I will now relate and their most melancholy aftermath.

AT THAT TIME, WHEN THE FIRST experiments were but begun, the great press of work did keep me in my office, but I did hear from Dr. Croone that there was a pretty experiment performed at Gresham College by Mr. King and Mr. Coxe, one of the first of its kind, following Dr. Lower at Oxford, and the method communicated by him to Mr. Boyle, of the blood of one dogg let out, till he died, into the body of another on one side, while all his own run out on the other side. The first died upon the place, and the other seemed very well, and did do well, giving hope that an operation of this kind might be performed upon men. Which did give occasion at that time to many pretty wishes, as of the blood of a Quaker to be let into an Archbishop, and such like; but, as Dr. Croone did say, it might be of mighty use to man's health to mend bad blood by borrowing from a better body. For which I did also have great hopes at that time, and wished mightily to see this experiment be done. And so I did speak of it to Francis Roche, a surgeon, yet withal an educated man with a mighty interest in the transfusion of blood, who had made me understand the circulation of blood to the kidneys by means of shewing me a dogg he did dissect, and many other things of this kind, whereby I reckoned him, though a surgeon, a learned man, and he also most eager to see the experiment done.

There was lacking only then a subject, perhaps some inmate of Bethlem Hospital, as Sir George Ent did propose, but Dr. Allen, their Keeper, not willing to permit it, this was not done at that time in England, although it had

HUMOUR

BY LOIS TILTON

Illustration by Jon Foster

already been practiced by the virtuosos in Paris. And so, there being great difficulty in procuring a suitable subject, the matter was postponed until November of the next year, when I did hear Deane Wilkins and other brave men discourse of a man that was a little frantic, that had been a kind of minister, Arthur Coga by name, Dr. Wilkins saying that he hath read for him in his church. Coga was a poore and a debauched man that the Society hired for twenty shillings to have some of the blood of a sheep let into his body; and it was to be done on Saturday next. They proposed to let in about twelve ounces; which, they did compute, was what would be let in in a minute's time by a watch. They did differ in the opinion they had of the effects of it; some thought it might have a good effect upon him as a frantic man by cooling his blood, others that it would not have any effect at all. But Coga was a healthy man, and by this means would be able to give an account what alteration, if any, he did find in himself, and so might be useful.

On this occasion also, I heard a pretty story of Dr. Caius, that built Keys College; that, being very old and living only at that time upon woman's milk, he, while he fed upon the milk of an angry, fretful woman, was so himself; and then, being advised to take it of a good-natured, patient woman, he did become so, beyond the common temper of his age. Thus much nutriment might do, and in the like manner, by the transfusion of blood, such alterations might be effected, as would greatly benefit men's condition.

This experiment then, on Arthur Coga, was practiced in Arundell House, by Dr. Lower assisted by Mr. King, who performed the chief part with much dexterity, and after some six or seven ounces of the man's own blood had been let out, the blood of a young sheep was transmitted into the great vein of his arm, in the presence of many spectators, Fellows of the Society and others, including Mr. Roche, whom Dr. Croone had carried there at my bidding, he with a mighty desire to see it done.

Owing again to press of business at my office, I being at that time in much fear of losing it, I was not present to observe the operation done, but a week afterward at Arundell House I was there pleased to see Coga himself, who spoke well, and did that day give a relation thereof in Latin, saying that he found himself much better since, and as a new man, but he was cracked a little in his head, though he spoke very reasonably, and very well. He had but a guinea for his suffering it: the first man that ever had it tried on him in England. The experiment was made again two weeks later, in the midst of a great crowd of spectators, who did press so closely that an exact measurement of the blood could not be made, and again Roche was among them. After, Coga was somewhat feverish, which alarmed no one present, it being imputed to his excess in drinking too much wine soon after.

It was then the desire of the Fellows of the Society that the operation might be done again, and the effects on Coga's reason determined, whether his temper might be much altered on account of the sheep's blood let into him. Yet this was not done, for he began to frequent the coffeehouses, where he did make complaint of the experiments, that they had ruined him and left him in want, that he must pawn his clothes. On hearing of this, as I later learned, Mr. Roche did carry him to his own house and persuaded him by payment of five guineas to suffer the operation again, yet not as it was done by the Fellows of the Society, in public, but with none to witness its effects, which is contrary to the best principles of philosophie. Three times at least Roche did let the blood of a sheep into his veins, in quantity above a pound, or more, but there was no great improvement, indeed, on my meeting with Coga some time afterward, there was such disorder and agitation in his speech that any man could see his condition altered for the worse. He had also a great black ulcer on his right arm, poore wretch!, which did stink mighty foul, and I must conclude that the operations had done him not good, but ill, for which I was ill-pleased. Coga then declared then he would suffer no more operations to be done on him, and so I believe he did not, either by the surgeon Roche or any physician.

Dr. Croone, when I related him these particulars, did agree with me that it were best such experiments not be repeated, lest the Society be brought into ridicule and disrepute, as it has lately happened in France.

For in the coffeehouses, the idle wits did make jest of the philosophers and the experiments of the Society, and they did also recite a ballad composed on the model of that work of Allatius that had then come into the hands of the booksellers, of the *vrykolaks* or *vampyres* of the Greeks, which are the bodies of dead men possessed by devils, which do rise from their grave at night and drink the blood of innocents, and in the 'Change and at White Hall and all the tavernes and the coffeehouses, men did make sport of the virtuosos of the Royal Society at their blood-drinking, to the great discontent of these worthy men.

So the experiments in the transmission of blood were ceased, yet I continued in great unease in my mind, for the talk in the coffeehouses and tavernes did not cease with it, and all the town did now speak of the dead creatures that drink blood, so that men went in fear and would not go near by a churchyarde at night, lest a corpse should leap out of its tombe and pursue them for their blood. And there was talk also that graves had been opened and dead men seen walking abroad at night, which I could not believe, yet upon examination of these reports, it proved true, that here and there in the city, graves did lie open and the dead lain within them nissing, which did trouble me greatly. And indeed it was told to me by my clerke William Hewer, that a man he had seen hanged as a housebreaker, a sturdy rogue, was the next morning missing from his grave, his coffin being broke open, to mighty consternation of all who did witness it. And also there were tales of hanged men coming down from their gibbets where they did hang and seeking the blood of the living, that they might come again to life.

Men did cry out then that it was the doing of the virtuosos and philosophers, for meddling with matters that no man ought, in the transfusion of blood and other matters, that they not only sought to make men into sheep, as was done with Arthur Coga, but far worse things, and that they did design to bring the dead to life again, in defiance of God's will, and thus brought into being these *vrykolaks*, by the transfusion of the blood of living men into the dead. And this was not now spoke of only in the tavernes and among idle men, but sermons were preached against the experiments and other practices of the Society, that such doings were contrary to the will of God and a kind of witchcraft, dealing with devils, to the grave concern of many worthy Fellows of the Society, who are godly men and in no wise of a mind to sin in such a manner.

Yet I did question in my mind whence these rumours did originate, for there had been among the Fellows of the Society no talk of bringing the dead to life, by the exchange of blood or any other means, only that the letting in of healthy blood might be for the betterment of men's health, and other like effects, and it only being done twice, on a living man, on Coga, and with the blood of a sheep. For a time I wondered if these reports and rumours could have come from him, for he was a man disordered in his mind and his temper, and convinced that he was ill-used by the philosophers who practiced on him. And so I with Dr. Croone did seek him out to question him about these matters, and then he did relate to us how a surgeon named Roche had done the operation on him three times again, paying him five guineas for his doing it. And that he proposed also to let the blood of a boy, his 'prentice, into him, but that he did refuse this, and Roche dismissed him with great heat and wrath.

This was the first that I learned of this experiment of Roche's, whereby I was in great unease in my mind, as I had first introduced him to this subject of the transfusion of blood. And at about that same time my own surgeon, Thomas Hollier, an understanding man, came to me with a story of a cozen of his wife's, a boy apprenticed to Roche, who had fled to him, pale and near to death from loss of blood. And further how this boy did relate that his master Roche had fixed on a notion of a kind of Alchemy of the blood that through transfusion of blood from one man to the other, a madman might become a reasoning man, or a sick man well, which was in accord with what the Society had proposed. So, Hollier said, Roche did procure for himself some poore men and women, feeble in the mind, not from Bethlem where the Keeper had refused them, but from their families, who had placed them in his charge, he representing that he could effect a cure by this means, as had been done for Coga, whom he declared to

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be fully restored to health, which was a falsehood that did vex me greatly to hear. And the blood of these lack-wits he let out of them and let in the blood his 'prentice, so that the boy had so much taken from him that he was near to death from the loss of it, and he did flee in fear of his taking yet more.

As Mr. Hollier consented that I might speak with the boy, I went to his house, where I saw indeed that he was very pale, with cruel dark bruises on his arms, poore lad! There I learned in questioning him that the affair was more grave than we had at first supposed. For the boy related further that his master did speak also of his letting some of the blood of the lack-wits into him, or into some other person of sound mind, so as to find out if the condition might be altered by this means. And for fear of it he fled and placed himself with Mr. Hollier that he might not return to this master. And he told us also that four altogether of the feeble-minded men and women had been brought to Roche, but now there were only two remaining, and he did fear that the other two had died. I queried him also if his master did read the works of Allatius, where he wrote of the *vrykolaks* who did drink men's blood, but he did not know, only that Roche had never spoken of such in his hearing, which did not satisfy me on that point. But the boy did add one thing more, that he thought he had seen his master drinking blood and with the stains of blood on his mouth, though I did doubt this, but it was all that could be learned from him at that time.

The next day I with Hollier took a coach to Roche's house and confronted him there; he was most unwilling to admit us but did at last consent and spake freely of the operations that he had done, letting the blood of his boy into the lack-wits he had gathered, to their very great improvement, so that one man who knew no language could now speak, and one other, who had been able to do no useful work, was now employed by him as his servant. I did ask Roche then, what of the other two men that the boy spake of, but he then grew mightily agitated, at first saying there were but two men he had done the operation on, then that there were two others, but that these were so greatly benefitted thereby that they were returned to their families as cured, yet when I inquired their names, that the Fellows of the Society might examine them, Roche would not reveal them, but only said that they were gone away.

We asked then to see the two men who were so much improved by receiving the boy's blood, and once again Roche was unwilling at first, saying it could not be done, but he did at last consent and sent for a servant, who came presently to be questioned, and he was a great lout and a fool who could not speak above two words when we saw him, "aye" and "nay," but Roche did claim that when he first came to him, he spake not at all, except in uncouth grunts, and that the improvement in him was so great that any one who had known him before could see it plainly. And he did make to beat the man, to make him speak, but Hollier prevented him, whereby Roche grew wrathful and bid us leave his house, which we did, but in mighty unease over this matter.

Roche refused also to speak of Allatius and whether he had read that work on the *vrykolaks* of the Greeks, though I did question him on it. Such matters are frightful to consider, how in that land the dead do rise from the grave and seek to drink men's blood, and how men there transfix the carcasses with stakes against their rising from the earth, believing the dead corpses to be inhabited by devils. And such a plague of the dead rising there did seem now to be in England, as

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there were everywhere in town reports of graves broke open, which could not be denied, and indeed I saw one with mine own eyes, the empty coffin of that robber Will Hewer did shew me. This man was a house-breaker, a great rogue, who, being brought to Tyburn to be hanged, his corpse was given to his friends to be buried, yet the next day his grave lay open and his coffin, with the carcase gone, to the great fear of all who did see and hear of it, that they did think the corpse was risen from the grave and gone abroad to seek men's blood. Yet I did think that had there not been so much talk beforehand of the dead rising, men would have thought it the work of grave robbers. And so I did believe, on seeing this grave dug up, and so told Will Hewer. And while some men did yet say that it was owing to the operations of the philosophers, yet withal I could not discern how they could think so, lest they would be thinking every surgeon a *vrykolak*, when he does let a man's blood to cure him, that he would be come from his grave to the bedside of the sick to get him blood to drink.

Yet being in such unease in my mind over this matter, I did make many inquiries, here and there in the taverns where men gather, and in other places, until by chance I met with a seaman, by name of Cobb, a stranger to me, who told me in all certainty that if the blood of a living man were let into a dead man, then he would come again to life, which I pronounced to be blasphemy, but he declared it was so. Then he related to me this account: that he had been drinking in a tavern, very merry with his shipmates, when there came to them a man, who called himself a surgeon,

in want of a sturdy man in good health to come to him for ten shillings to have blood let out of him, as an experiment in philosophie. So Cobb and his fellow seaman did go with him to his house, where the surgeon put a silver pipe into the vein of his arm, and let out blood to the amount of a pint or more, so much as it did make him feel faint, and this blood was let into a man that lay beneath a sheet below him, so that whether he was dead he did not know, but he thought he was dead, as he did not move. Then the surgeon did give him ten shillings, and he went away, but his shipmate stayed, and Cobb did declare he had not seen him since, which troubled me. At my asking him did he know the name of this surgeon, he said he did not but did say that he was a dark man, with heavy brows, so that I did think of Roche, who was a man of this kind.

Then I did resolve to discover the truth of this matter, whether Francis Roche was this surgeon the seaman had spake of, and so I did go by coach to his house, leaving Will Hewer with the coach. Roche was at first unwilling to admit me, yet I did speake myself keen to discourse with him about his experiments with the transfusion of blood and to see the results thereof, that men had told me were mighty wonderful, that a man who was dead could be returned to life, which I wished to witness with my own eyes. I did ask also after his servant that had been feeble in his mind, but he was not there, Roche saying he had done so well that he had gone back to his family, speaking now as well as any man. Then his heart warmed toward me again, and he did admit me and shewed me first a pretty dogg that he did tell me had been bled until it died, and was then brought back to life by means of a transfusion of blood, which I praised in great admiration, saying I would see such a thing done upon a man, were it possible.

I did say this in hopes he would expose himself as a grave robber and offer to shew me the experiment upon a corpse he had stolen out

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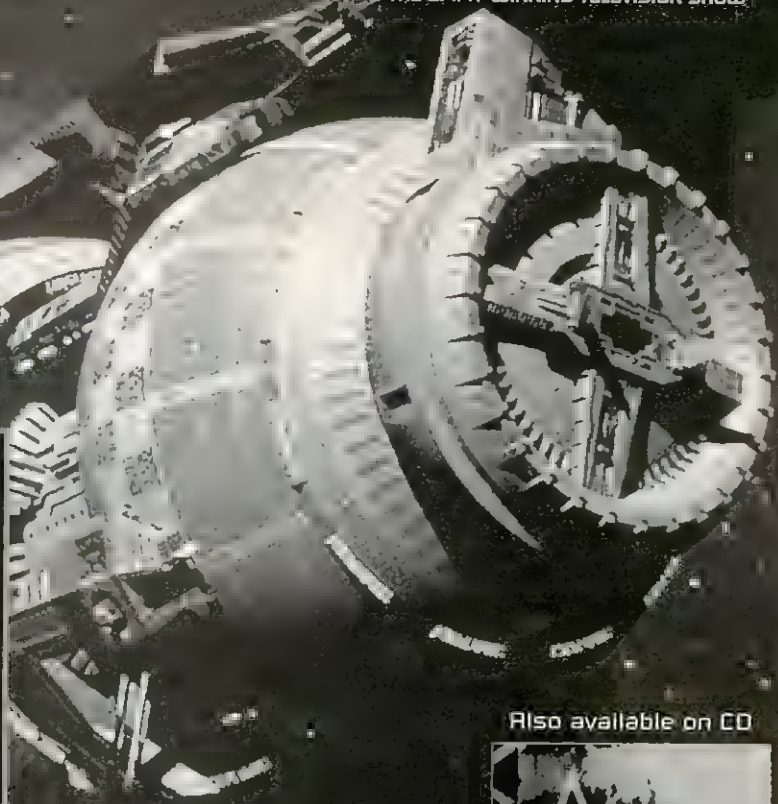
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SPEARMINT

BY BATYA SWIFT YASGUR

Illustration by Al Kamajian

Mommy and Daddy always know what's best. At least, when the doctor comes, that's what Baby hopes.

I HATE THE SHOTS. THEY HURT. One big needleful two times a week. Mondays it's the man doctor. I hate him. He's got this wicked look in his eyes like the witch in *Snow White*. And whenever he comes near me with that long needle, I scream and scream. But he doesn't care. He sticks me in my—you know, my bottom. Then he smiles. His mouth is all crooked. Like the kind of smiley face I used to draw in kindergarten, and my teacher Mrs. Peterson said I didn't draw so good yet. Then he pets my head like I pet Kitty when I'm mad. And he says good girl. But I know he doesn't mean it.

The lady, the Thursday nurse. I like her. She pets my head too, but soft, like when I stroke Kitty and make nice. She says things like Poor Child. And kisses my cheek. Sometimes she cries. But she won't tell me why when I ask her.

Why do I need shots, I ask Mommy. I'm sitting on that table in the doctor's office. I'm cold 'cause they made me take off my clothes again.

Mommy's eyes roll around and she looks at the ceiling. Then she bangs her hand on the table. I'm scared when she does that, so I hug my Blankie. Mommy always says I'm too old for a Blanket, but when she tries to make me leave it home, I cry and I cry and once I even

kicked her. She spanked me that time, but she let me keep the Blanket. She was about to throw it out in the hall, down that teeny smelly little room where they take the garbage, but Daddy said no. His face looked, well, like it looks a lot of the time these days. Sort of sad and tired. His eyes are falling into those bags of skin he keeps on the tops of his cheeks, and his mouth is all droopy on the sides. Let the child be. That's what he says. She's got little enough in her life.

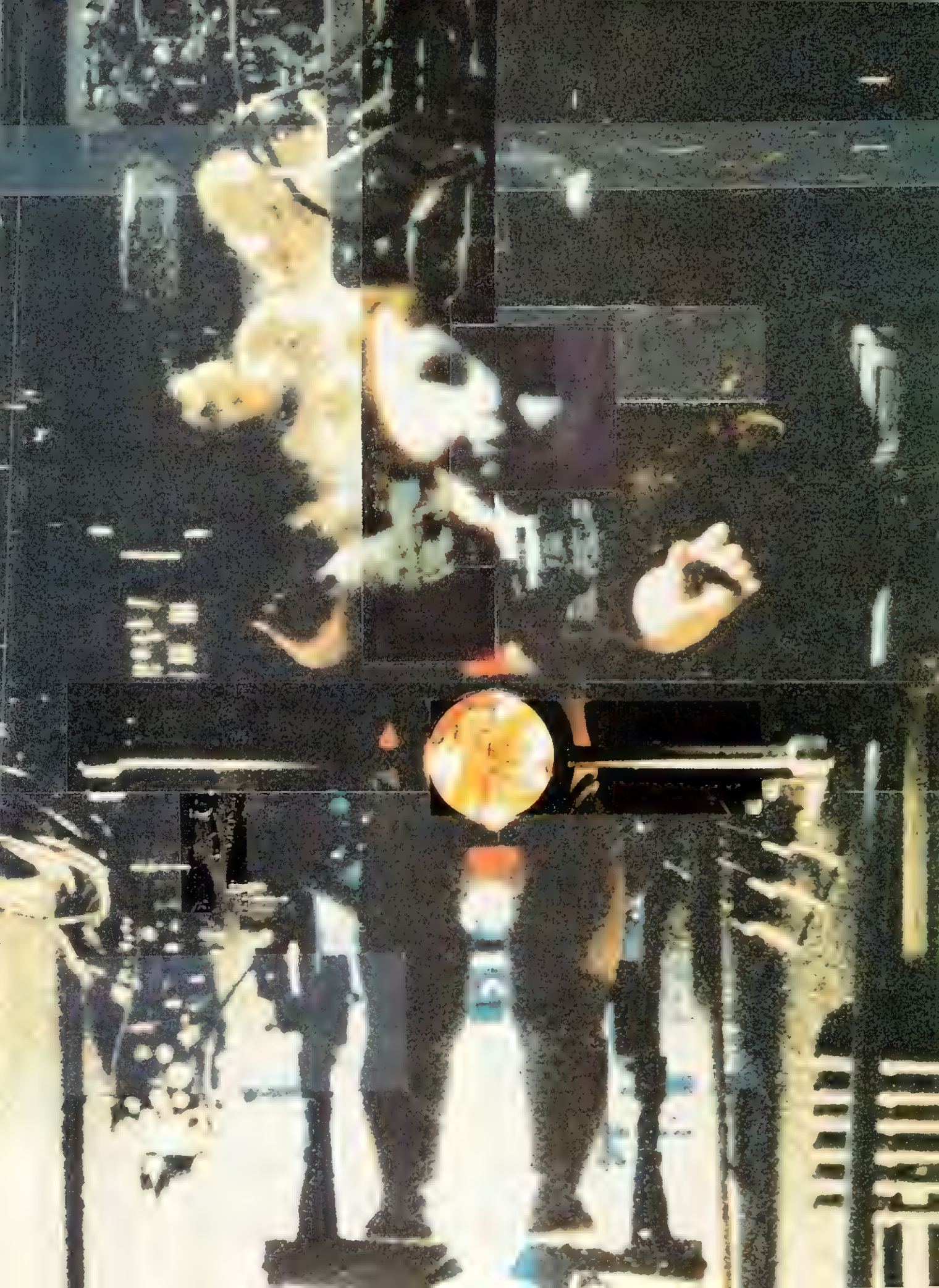
Mommy yelled at Daddy, and Daddy turned on the TV, and Mommy turned it off, and Daddy turned it on, and Mommy forgot my Blankie. I tiptoed—quiet, quiet—back to bed. And hugged my Blankie till I fell asleep.

So that's how I got to keep it. And now, sitting on the table, shaking like this paper on this clipboard they put next to where the air conditioner blows out cold, I try to ask Mommy again. Why? Why the shots?

The doctor knows best, dear. And then Mommy gives the door her big Hello Stranger smile, 'cause the doctor is walking into the room.

They stand by the window like they always do. Talking in whispery voices. I don't understand the long words. Mommy asks, how's she doing. The doctor says something about the spearmint going well, ready for next phase.

I want to ask what's spearmint got to do



with it, and what's a phase. But I know better than to open my mouth.

Of course, Mommy wasn't always like this. When we lived in the big red house with the grassy lawn, she used to buy me nice toys and read me stories at bedtime. She used to rock me on her lap and push me on the swings in the playground. That was when Daddy worked at the bank with the funny ladies behind those circle windows, who gave me lollipops.

But then everything changed. Daddy's job got lost and he didn't know where to find it. We had to leave the big, beautiful house. My rocking horse stayed at the house, and my swing set. Mommy said some new little girl or boy will play with them now, we won't have room where we're going. I got to take just my Dolly and my Blankie and Kitty and that's it.

And so we moved to the New Place. Mommy hated it right away. So did Daddy. I used to hear them yelling late at night, and sometimes crying. Grown-ups crying! The New Place is called an apartment. It's stuffy and holey and pokey. Mommy and Daddy are always talking about money, money. I said they could have the pennies from my piggy bank. That's money, right? But Mommy and Daddy started to cry and Mommy ran out of the room.

They still yell nights. When they think I'm sleeping. I still hear the word money a lot. And how they maybe will buy a new house soon. But now they also say lots of stuff I don't understand. They talk a lot about the spearmint I'm in.

I know Mommy and the mean doctor talk about money too, not just spearmints.

When I'm dressed again and the shot is over, Mommy gets ready to leave the doctor's office. She stops at the front desk where the lady sits with her typewriter. The lady looks at me funny, and she gives Mommy an envelope like always. Then we go for ice cream and to the bank where Mommy does something with the lady's envelope. Then home. I want to play outside, but Mommy always says no. After the shots I'm supposed to take it easy. So I watch *Sesame Street* and suddenly Mommy's shaking me. Get up, sleepyhead. Time for dinner. I always fall asleep after these shots.

Dinner is yummy. Steak and potatoes, my favorite. Then apple pie. It's nice we have enough money again to buy steak, and we don't have to eat peanut butter sandwiches all the time and use stamps at the supermarket, not just the post office.

Want to hear something else weird? Daddy won't eat the steak. You're buying it with my daughter's blood, he says, and he pushes the plate away. No, Daddy, I try to tell him. Mommy used real money this time, not blood and not post office stamps either. The supermarket wouldn't take blood, would they. And Mommy looks real mad at Daddy and says something about not scaring the child any more than she already is, and Daddy gets up and leaves the room. Funny, 'cause steak used to be his favorite food too.

SOMETHING WEIRD IS HAPPENING. MY CHEST hurts all the time. And there are little bumps starting like where Mommy has hers. Every day they get bigger and bigger. Fast. So fast. Like watching a balloon blow up. They're starting to look—like Mommy's! Or like Mrs. Peterson's. She was my kindergarten teacher last year, before they made me stop going to school.

People look at me funny on the street and in the store so Mommy's stopped taking me out. Now I watch lots of TV and videos (Yay! We got a VCR!) and I just go out to the doctor. I like the videos, but I miss Betsy and Sarah and how we used to play house. Sometimes I see them through the window. They always look like they're having a fun time. I bet they forgot me.

I don't understand why Mommy won't let me play with them anymore. But that's one of the questions I'm not supposed to ask.

At least I have Kitty—well, sort of. She doesn't want to come into my room like she used to. And when I try to hold her she doesn't purr anymore. And when I ask her, she doesn't talk English, and I don't talk

cat language. I try to meow, but she doesn't understand.

Something else. I'm getting hair under my arms and—you know where. First it was soft and fuzzy, but now it looks strong and curly like Mommy's.

I—I—I.

I've stopped screaming. Quiet again. So scared. Mommy spanked me. But I couldn't help it. My nose is still all runny. The tears keep coming out of my eyes like Cry Baby Dolly when she broke.

Blood! There's blood. Coming out from between my legs. Am I sick, I asked Mommy. Is this why I need shots?

First Mommy didn't say. Funny. Her eyes also looked like Cry Baby Dolly. Then she went out of the room. She came back in with this thick white thing, sort of like a diaper. It came in this package with a picture of a pretty lady on the cover. It fit funny, so Mommy had to cut it with her big sewing scissors. She said this happens to ladies. Only I'm not a lady yet. I'm early. She said I should be proud 'cause I'm growing up so fast. Faster than Betsy and Sarah. I'm the fastest grown little girl in the entire world. Mommy says this never happened to anyone this young before.

I guess I should be proud.

But inside, deep, where the blood comes from, I know something must be broken. Blood is from boo-boos, isn't it. And I'm scared. I hold Blankie in bed and cry till it's wet and soggy and mushy.

What's happening to me?

T

MORROW THEY'RE GOING TO TAKE ME away and put me in a place called a hospital. I know a little about hospitals. At the Christmas party last year I fell off Santa's lap. Mommy thought I broke my arm. She took me to this place, the hospital. We sat in some kind of giant room with other sick people and a lady on the ceiling calling Doctor Somebody to dial nine, and Doctor Somebody Else to dial eight. We waited a million years. Loads of nice nurses were there. They smiled

a lot. Then this nice man took pictures of my arm with a funny camera. It wasn't broken. Then we walked down a long, long hall. There were bedrooms and people lying in beds. Some had TVs and pretty flowers on their tables. There were more nurses. Everyone smiled at me. I smiled back.

I think I'm going to like the hospital.

LIGHTS OUT. NEW BED. I'M HOLDING BLANKIE. MOMMY JUST WENT home. They told her she didn't need to sleep here. That the sweet syrupy stuff they made me drink would put me to sleep. Daddy wanted to stay but Mommy said no, it's better to go.

This isn't like the hospital I remember. Not one little bit.

It's the same place I get my shots, just a different part of the building. There's just one room. It's got a bed. A funny bed with metal things at the bottom. And little bottles on the tables. And the same nice nurse. Same mean doctor.

There's no TV.

There are no flowers.

My eyes feel funny. Heavy. Like someone put a suitcase on them. Why won't they stay open?

I'M HOME AGAIN. I'M ALL TIRED AND EVERYTHING I SEE IS MUSHED UP and the room turns around and around when I try to stand up. Like after that time Betsy and me pretended we were ballerinas and we twirled around so many times we fell down, then when we got up we felt the room was moving, not us! And my tummy hurts, especially between my legs. There's more blood and I wear those diaper pads.

Mommy comes and strokes my head. I like it when she does that.

Daddy doesn't come in my room much anymore. But when he does, he kinda looks at the wall and then at the floor and then out the win-

dow. He only stays in an itty bitsy time. Like till the little hand has gone around the clock three times. Then he runs out.

But I hear him and Mommy at night. They're real loud. Look what you're letting them do to her, and all for money! he yells. You're going along with it too! she screams back. She's probably standing over by the sink. I hear his chair scraping across the floor and his deep voice saying, Yeah, and I hate myself for it. It's science, Mommy says, and don't you forget that.

I don't want to hear any more, so I put my pillow over my ears. Kitty never comes in the room anymore. She's forgotten me, just like Betsy and Sarah.

I CAN GET UP AND WALK AROUND AGAIN. I FEEL FUNNY. I THROW UP A lot. 'Specially in the mornings. And my tummy feels weird.

But—the good news is!—No more shots! Yay!

MY TUMMY IS BIGGER AND FATTER. LIKE I SWALLOWED A BASKETBALL or maybe a watermelon. It's been growing every day. Still no more shots, no more throw up, but I still go to that dumb, mean old doctor. Every Monday. He makes me take off my bottom clothes and lie down and put my feet into those metal things, and he looks inside me. He uses a funny flashlight and a cold metal thing. I hate him looking at me there. He says things to Mommy like, It's coming along, or Growing nicely.

What's growing nicely?

GUESS WHAT MOMMY TOLD ME TODAY?

I'm going to have a baby!

A real, live, wiggly, cute little baby!

Me! I thought you had to be grown-up but Mommy said no. I'm special. I'm different. She said something else. I didn't understand all the words. But I've learned not to ask questions. She said I've contributed to science by being in this spearmint. So I should be grateful.

But how did the baby get into me? Mommy gets That Look on her face when I ask her. Nevermind, she says. What's important is that you're going to be a mother soon.

Daddy isn't excited like Mommy. He's hardly home anymore. When he came into my room last night to tuck me in, I held his hand. I stroked the rough, whiskery stuff on his face. Daddy, did Mommy tell you? I shook his arm so he'd pay attention. You know, about the Baby? But he just looked at me funny. Then ran out of the room.

A Baby all my own! That's better than the bestest dollies! And what's best, it'll be mine. When Betsy got her new baby brother, her Mommy wouldn't let her hold him except maybe a teeny time, like two seconds. But this'll be my very own baby. Not Mommy's or anyone else's. And I'll be able to do whatever I want. Betsy and Sarah can come over and play house, and we'll use a real live baby! The baby will be all mine, to cuddle and play with and take for walks in the baby carriage. And put mushy food into its tiny little mouth. It'll be so much fun! And she—the Baby—can use all my toys—my dollies, my books, everything. (Of course, it'll be a she. Not a he. 'Cause I hate boys. They're dumb and wild.)

I can't wait!

THEY MOVED ME TO THE HOSPITAL. BLOOD IS COMING OUT BETWEEN MY legs. They're all worried and serious looking. I hope the Baby hasn't hurt herself, and that's why there's blood. 'Cause I don't know how to get a band-aid into my tummy. Maybe if I swallow it—

IT HURTS. I FEEL BABY CRAWLING AROUND IN ME. IT WAS FUN AT THE beginning. But now it hurts. She pushes against my belly like I used to push Betsy when she cut in front of me in the sandwich line in the lunchroom. What if—what if my tummy bursts open like a balloon, like the balloon at my birthday party that Mrs. Peterson blew up too much?

I'M SO BIG I CAN'T WALK ANYMORE. THEY GAVE ME THIS SPECIAL THING to wear. It has straps. It holds my belly up, 'cause if I don't have it, the Baby'll make my belly fall off and land on the floor—or something like

that. They say my date is soon. They call it a doo-date. I wonder if I get the baby out like Kitty gets her doo-doo's out. Or whether the Baby comes out the same hole as the blood.

TOMORROW. THEY'RE GONNA CUT ME OPEN TOMORROW. THEY'RE TAKING the Baby out. The nice nurse said real grown-ups get their babies out through their blood holes, but mine is too little 'cause I'm still a little kid.

I'm scared. It hurted when they stuck me with needles. It hurts when I fall and get a knee scrape and Mommy has to put on that stinky stuff with cotton wool.

What if I die?

What if the Baby dies?

IT HURTS.

It hurts.

It hurts.

Where they cut me open it feels like a fire is burning a line across my belly. They give me medicine to make the pain better but it doesn't help much. Someone, someone please! Make the hurt go away!

Feels better today. Just a little. I walked a bit, and it only hurt some. Not a lot.

It was a girl!

She's so tiny. She's got the cutest little fingers and toesies, and she's got no teeth! Which is good because when she drinks milk from me, she can't bite me.

She sleeps a lot. Mommy says all babies do that. And she cries a lot too. Mommy says that doesn't mean she doesn't like me. That's just what babies do.

I sure hope she grows up soon, so I can play with her.

THEY'RE MEAN! THEY'RE MEAN! I HATE THEM!

They won't let me play with her. Or change her. Or take her for a walk in the baby carriage. They won't let me give her a bath. The nice nurse takes care of her. Sometimes she sneaks me in and lets me watch her sleep. But she always shoos me out of there in a hurry. And tells me not to tell anyone, she's not supposed to interfere with the spearmint, that her job could get lost like Daddy's did if anyone finds out.

Usually I just get to see her when she drinks my milk.

Only one thing they were nice about. I got to pick out her name. I heard Mommy and the doctor. They were yelling and Mommy was crying. She does that a lot. The doctor was talking more about spearmints, but I didn't see him chewing any gum. His face was all red and sweaty. But he said OK, he didn't think me choosing the name could do any harm.

I named her Dolly. I want my Dolly!

IT'S ALL HAPPENING SO QUICK. LIKE THOSE PICTURES IN MY kaleidoscope that change and turn and change and turn.

I'm getting shots again, new ones. And isn't it weird. My chest is growing littler every day. And my hair—not the hair on my head, my *other* hair—is falling out. No more blood between my legs. No funny diaper pads.

Also we're moving. To a new house. A gigantic mansion. I'm still in the hospital, so I haven't seen it yet. But I saw pictures. Wow! It's so big! It's got a lawn. And a *swimming pool*. And a swing set all my own! Mine and Dolly's.

Funny. I thought Mommy and Daddy would be happy. They hated the apartment so much. But they yell at each other all the time anyway. Daddy's eyes are always like Cry Baby Dolly's. Soccer-fice our child just for a house, he says. What's wrong with an apartment. Are we gonna play soccer in the house, I ask, but Daddy won't say.

Maybe things'll get better in the new house.

DOLLY ISN'T COMING WITH US.

She's going to stay in the hospital.

Continued on page 108





The scientists had brought a little bit of Mars to planet Earth. Unfortunately, they had done their job too well.

VR MARSBASE 1

BY PETE D. MANISON

Illustration by David Beck

THE GODS HAD NOT SPOKEN IN TEN passes of Diemos, and Justin Picazo felt the familiar unease returning. All around him, in a northern tributary of the Great Rift Valley, his team accomplished marvels. They dug into the red, Martian earth to expand the pressurized habitat while they seeded the surface with life. This should have been a time of joy. And it was—mostly.

Maybe it was the illness. He had been removed as mission commander because of it. But what illness was it that made a man hear voices that weren't there or see impossible things?

Justin looked out at the boulder field that extended across the flatlands beyond the impassible canyon. It was sunset; the horizon glowed pink. Even in his pressure suit, he could almost imagine he felt the wind.

Was it coming? Would he next hear the voices or see the impossible things? Would he hear again the words of the gods themselves?

FELICIA WELLS TOOK OFF HER SUNGLASSES. IT DIDN'T LOOK LIKE MUCH from the outside. It was big—she supposed that accounted for the allure it held for most people. A geodetic dome three miles across *was* impressive, but to her it was an unsightly lump on the New Mexican desert, interesting only for what it contained.

"May I see your security pass, Ma'am?"

Felicia had stopped at the gatehouse and rolled down the Mazda's window. Now she put the transmission in park and flipped through her wallet until she found the card.

"Out of the wallet, please," said the guard.

Felicia saw her own pouting blond face in the guard's wrap-around sunglasses, but she did as he instructed and then waited patiently while he scanned the bar code and checked her face against the photo.

"Enjoy your stay on Mars," he said, returning the card. She grunted and drove on, the tires of her Mazda sending up a cloud of orange dust.

Inside the facility, her reception was no warmer.

"You're Dr. Wells?"

"Yes, I'm Felicia Wells. And you might be?"

The man was fair-skinned, in his mid-thirties, and Felicia took an immediate disliking to him. "Alexander Burket. You can call me Alex. I'm supposed to be in charge of psychologic things hereabouts."

"Dr. Burket. I've read your reports on the behavioral anomalies. They raise more questions than they answer."

"So do you, Miss—I'm sorry—Dr. Wells. When did NASA decide to bring in an outsider? We take care of our own problems here, you know, and I'm perfectly qualified—"

"Maybe NASA's just looking at your results, Dr. Burket. Now, can you please point me toward the director's office?"

Felicia set out through the busy corridors, half expecting Burket to follow. Thankfully, he didn't, and she made it unmolested to the director's office. Project Director Paxton was a rotund man in his early fifties. His smile came quickly when she introduced herself.

"Please, Dr. Wells, take a seat, take a seat. And welcome to Mars, as I'm sure you've heard a million times by now."

"Not quite a million, director, and I'm happy to be here. Please call me Felicia—Dr. Wells makes me sound like a TV heart surgeon. When do I go in?"

"Eager to get to work, eh? That's what I like to see. We've got real trouble, and my resident staff is more studied in the hard sciences than the soft ones."

"So I noticed. I've been following the Virtual Mars Project since it began, Dr. Paxton, so I know how fortunate I am to be involved with it. I think most people would pay you for the chance to go inside."

"Believe me, we've had some interesting offers. But this isn't an amusement park. We've reduced the pressure and temperature in there and jacked up the bombardment by hard radiation. It's not as deadly as the true Martian surface, but if you were exposed to it long enough, you would die."

"Everything's carefully regulated, I'm sure."

"Absolutely. There are over two hundred technicians on duty at all times."

"Sounds very efficient. So what's the trouble? Quarrels among the astronauts? Depression? I remember in Biosphere 7 we had—"

"Nothing so simple as that, I'm afraid. We've had to break contact with the expedition. They think they're really on Mars."

THE GROUND FLOATED UP TO HER FEET, AND SHE PUSHED OFF AGAIN, harder. What great fun! She could leap two meters into the air easily. And the projection on the inside of her visor completely erased all signs of the harness she wore and the elastic cables she knew connected it to the runners in the ceiling. In fact, Felicia thought as she watched the landscape rise and fall with each leap, there was *nothing* to tell you this was the inside of an enclosed dome and not the actual surface of Mars.

She stopped one hundred meters from the crash site and looked back. Perfect. The smoke, the blackened rocks, even the steam cloud that would come from melting permafrost. It really *looked* kilometers away.

And the cold. It penetrated her suit even with the heat turned up to MAX. She picked up a rock. This, at least, was real. The entire surface of the simulator vault consisted of actual Martian rock and soil returned by the Ares probes.

"Attention unidentified cosmonaut," a voice in Felicia's helmet challenged. "Please respond."

Felicia let them approach. *Better not to move*, she cautioned herself. *Don't want to alarm them*. They greeted her warily, and after she'd introduced herself, they all watched together as her capsule exploded.

"So much for the recovery," one of them, a woman named Torres, said. "It was too far anyway."

They took her to the habitat, a long cylinder buried in the red soil. It reminded her of a submarine—a sad, landlocked submarine that could never surface.

"Why weren't we informed of your launch?" another of them asked. This was Serina Jones, acting commander of the mission. Commander Picazo had been removed due to a mysterious illness.

Felicia showed them her false credentials as she recited the cover story Director Paxton had given her. "They're keeping a tight lid on news of this disease some of your people have contracted. They sent me to try and cure it."

"You're a doctor, then?"

"Yes." It wasn't really a lie, Felicia told herself; she just wasn't a *medical* doctor. Then she almost laughed aloud at the thought. *All of this was a lie*. Had these people really forgotten that?

A short time later, they showed her the isolation ward. She never doubted their sincerity after that.

THE GODDESS HAD COME! JUST AS HE had dreamed it. Just as the gods had promised. Only why did she hide herself among them, pretending to be from

Earth? When she spoke to Justin in the sick ward, she sounded more like a doctor than a goddess. But he knew.

"You come from that other place," Justin told her when they found themselves alone for a brief moment. "It will be our secret." She gave him the oddest look, but then Serina was at her shoulder, offering a tour of the lichen farms, and the woman who called herself Felicia Wells turned away. Only once did she turn back to look at him where he lay in his sickbed. He nodded once.

Your secret is safe with me, Justin told her, only thinking it so that none of the others would hear.

HER FIRST IMPULSE WAS TO JUST TELL THEM, TO JUST SHOUT, "IT'S A training exercise, remember? New Mexico? VR? Anything ring a bell?" But after the first day, Felicia knew she couldn't do it. These people were deluded, perhaps psychotic. Most wouldn't believe the truth if they heard it; the rest would suffer major psychological trauma when their new belief systems were shattered.

Biosphere 7. Now she knew why they'd selected her for this mission. Her publishing credits or behavioral modification research certainly hadn't gotten her selected. It was her experience in an enclosed, scientifically regulated environment. That would help, no doubt, but Felicia still found herself doubting her ability. And she felt torn by the moral dilemma: on one hand, it was like a cult brainwashing; on the other, some of the effects seemed so *positive*.

"These are our atmospheric exhaust fans," a meteorologist named Aaron Franklin told her. "A lot of Mars' oxygen is bound up in the rocks—just like on the Moon. And over that ridge, we're building a new water storage facility."

"It's all quite exciting," Felicia said.

She watched the workers in their pressure suits as they toiled among a number of remote controlled construction machines. They had accomplished much in the 165 days since their landing. They had covered most of the actual ground area with life of one kind or

another: fungi, ants, even three varieties of earthworms. They had built small accommodations for themselves at first, then expanded them. But this wasn't why Felicia smiled as she watched them working down there. Something inside them seemed to have come alive under the hardship of this life. They were robust, cheerful, incredibly tough, and optimistic. They'd paired off, and three of the women were already expecting children. They were *happy*.

"But none of it's real," she murmured unconsciously.

"Pardon?" Aaron turned so his silvered visor faced her own. He looked like some kind of automaton she could program at will. But someone had beaten her to it.

"Nothing," she said quickly. "I was just thinking it all seems like a dream."

Aaron laughed, and she could imagine his open smile through the silver. "Sometimes it does," he said. "Sometimes it does."

When they got back to the base, Serina had news for them. "We've re-established contact with Earth," she said. The twenty Martian explorers cheered. "They say another supply ship is on the way."

Everyone cheered again, more loudly than before, but Felicia felt a cold knot in her stomach. It was Paxton's code to her. He wanted a rendezvous.

"THEY'VE INVENTED AN ILLNESS TO EXPLAIN WHY SOME OF THEM occasionally see through the simulation or remember that they have other lives in the outside world. It's hard to explain, but I felt it myself. When you're in there for a while, you really *do* forget it's VR."

Felicia could feel Dr. Burket scowling at her from across the conference table as she spoke. It looked like he and Paxton had exchanged words about her. And Burket had lost.

"We've all been in there enough to know it can be a little...overwhelming." Paxton's voice sounded tired. "What we need to know is how to get them out with a minimum of emotional trauma."

Felicia was framing a reply when Burket bent forward. "We just switch it off. Simple as that." He snapped his fingers.

Paxton sighed. Felicia saw an old pattern begin again as the younger Burket forced his ideas on the uncertain director.

"What's your hurry?" she asked, meeting Burket's stare when he turned to regard her.

"The longer they remain in this fantasy land of theirs, the more psych damage is done."

"It's not only how long they're in," she snapped back, "it's how they're brought out. I would have thought that was obvious."

Burket turned toward Paxton. "Sir," he began, "I—"

Paxton's eyes never moved. Not a muscle in his face moved. Yet, somehow, Burket knew to stop.

"Your ideas?" Paxton asked softly. He was still looking at Burket, but it was clear the question had been directed at her.

"VR therapy is accepted by most analysts. In a sense, VR Marsbase 1 can be considered an elaborate mechanism for monitoring reactions to a simulated environment. It's more a psych tool than anything else."

Even as she spoke, Felicia began to feel that something wasn't right. She frowned. "The whole point is to test the astronauts—physically *and* psychologically. Why don't you have more brain doctors on staff?"

Paxton smiled sadly. "Feds cut the budget," he said.

Burket jumped to his feet and started pacing the room. "Why," he said as he walked, "don't we drop all this BS and turn this Mars jar off before it blows up in our faces!" He was now shouting.

Finally Felicia said, "I think the Feds screwed up."

Burket tensed as if to attack her, but then he caught the look in the director's eye. "Holy Moses," Burket said under his breath, "I'm working with a bunch of morons." He hesitated only a second before leaving the conference room by way of a slamming door.

"What are we going to do?" Paxton asked quietly.

Felicia felt a sudden tingling, but she wasn't certain of its source. "Maybe he's right," she heard herself say. On the monitors that ran down the center of the conference table, images of the VR vault flicked into existence: miners eating dust-covered tuna sandwiches

on their rest breaks, biologists remote-piloting rovers over the surface and seeding the soil with microorganisms, people at work or play, building or tearing down. On one screen, a couple made love in a darkened cubicle. On another, two spacesuited figures walked hand in hand. So tranquil. So alive.

"I can't authorize a shutdown," Paxton was saying. "Not yet. The vice president is very keen on this project—*very* keen."

Felicia could only see the faces—the smiling, contented faces. To think of turning those smiles to frowns, that laughter to bitter sobbing. No, she couldn't bear it.

Maybe it wasn't Mars on the other side of that door. Maybe it was something even better.

HEAVEN OPENED BEFORE HIM, AND THE LIGHT OF GOD SHONE OUT INTO the Martian night. Justin knelt behind the boulder and watched as the solitary figure emerged.

The goddess! She had returned!

And then the world sealed itself again, and only the tiny red light of her suit's locator beam stabbed out across the desert.

NOT LONG AFTER HER RETURN, FELICIA GOT THE ANSWER TO A QUESTION that had been nagging her. She and a young horticulturist named Sandra Burns had traveled far from the habitat in a buggy they'd driven along the winding paths through the terrain. The landscaping engineers had done a remarkable job of making the area of the simulator vault, already immense, seem even larger. The path curved back on itself time and again as they moved along. Rough terrain disguised the wall—where real rock and earth ended and projection began. Usually the terrain was so rough it prevented physical approach, and if you kept to the path, you couldn't reach the wall and still have enough air to get back to habitat.

"We'd better go back," Sandra said. Felicia had struck up a quick friendship with Sandra, whom she had learned was Serina's lover. The girl was bright and quick.

Felicia pulled two extra oxygen canisters from her backpack. "We can go farther," she said.

Sandra looked surprised, Felicia thought, then frightened. She began to shake her head "no" when Felicia took her hand and squeezed it. "Please? I'd like to see what's farther along," Felicia said.

Sandra finally agreed, and the two of them hooked up the fresh air canisters to their suits.

An hour later they had reached the end of the world. They had left the trail that led to the door, but Felicia had no trouble spotting the wall. Dust moving in faint air currents betrayed its location, and she wondered how Sandra could fail to notice.

Then it was there. She could sense it right in front of her. Felicia stopped. Sandra didn't; her knee hit the wall with a solid thump.

"Ooops," the young woman said, giggling and looking down as she turned. "Wrong way." She never mentioned the incident again.

"THE SUPPLY SHIP IS RUNNING LATE," Serina said when Felicia went to see her in the command center. The mission commander looked tired, but her eyes

held a light of accomplishment such as Felicia had never seen except in films of Buzz Aldrin and Neil Armstrong on the Moon. Serina and the others had much to be proud of. They had proven that humans could survive the voyage to Mars and a prolonged stay on its surface.

But now Serina looked troubled.

"They've launched a ship to return us to Earth," she said quietly.

Aaron and Torres and the rest of the twenty had gathered in the main cylinder for Serina's announcement. Now they looked at one another, muttering or cursing or more often just staring. Not one of them smiled.

Felicia had missed dinner. She felt exhausted from the day's

walking. The last thing she wanted to do was put on a pressure suit again—ever.

"I hate this job," she groaned.

JUSTIN HAD PRAYED FOR MANY HOURS, SITTING THERE IN THE MIDST OF his Navajo sand paintings. They were a tribute to the goddess, and they helped to pass the time. And now, at last, the gods had answered his prayers. Here came the lights of a suit. It was a solitary figure, jogging. It was *her*!

Justin watched as she went to exactly the same spot as before. He was already moving toward her when she opened the door to the heavens.

"YOU HAVE TO CALL OFF THE RETURN flight," Felicia insisted. Burket had tried to shout her down the first time she'd said it, but Paxton had told him, simply, "Shut up."

"We'd intended to," the director said. "The flight was programmed into the communication simulator, time lag and everything, and it seems *someone* forgot to delete it when we decided to put the operation into quarantine." He glared at the now silent Burket as he said the last words.

"Now what do we do?" Felicia asked into the unnatural silence that had descended upon the conference room.

Paxton shook his head. "We'll think of something. They'll be hit by a meteor and have to turn back, something like that."

Felicia could hardly believe what she was hearing. "It's so easy for you, isn't it? So easy to create a reality." Both men were staring at her now. "Well, Director Paxton and Dr. Burket, I don't think either one of you have a clue what you've created."

She wanted to tell them how she had seen a spark there, a spark of humanity, of belonging, that she knew had never existed in her own life. It was something important, something rare. A way of living that brought meaning. It made Felicia desperate to find a way of getting it for herself.

But it's only a dream, she told herself. *It isn't right to let it continue.* The dilemma twisted her insides, made her want to cry out for someone to help, for someone to explain.

But there was Burket, staring at her smugly, and the director's eyes blinked at her vacantly, and she knew she couldn't begin to tell them what she was feeling.

"They'll run out of food if we don't cheat and get the supply ship there faster than it possibly could in real life." Creases of worry aged Paxton's face twenty years. "They're bound to notice."

Felicia remembered Sandra at the wall. "I don't think you have anything to worry about, but I'm really beginning to question whether we're getting anywhere. We need to start preparing them, start seeding their minds with ideas. We need to find ways to ease the transition shock."

"Such as?" Burket asked.

"Such as how do we bring them out? We could continue the simulation to its end, let them come home as heroes. Maybe we even owe them that."

"And when they find out the truth? Can you imagine the humiliation? The anger?"

Felicia stared at Burket. Somewhere in his eyes she saw the predator, the beast waiting...no, not a predator. A scavenger. A vulture.

"They could come out and go straight into therapy," she said quickly, looking away. "I don't know."

Paxton started to speak, but Burket cut him off. "What a load of shit! If they're going into therapy, why not go on and start now?"

"Dr. Burket," the director said softly, "please do not ever interrupt me again."

Burket froze, and Felicia saw him wavering. Then he slumped back into his chair.

"The most important thing for now," said Paxton, "is to avoid any

sudden, ill-considered decisions. There are so many things. Do we bring them all out together? Or do we bring them out one at a time? Can we—"

Felicia saw the color drain from Paxton's face. He was staring at something behind her right shoulder.

HEAVEN! HE, JUSTIN PICAZO, HAD GONE TO HEAVEN! AND HERE WAS the goddess, and so many others...

"My God," one of them said. He must have been addressing the god nearby, for this second god looked up at the words, as did the goddess. Everyone was staring straight at Justin.

Justin thought of his people, pioneers on a new world, scratching out an existence where life was never meant to be. Terraforming a new planet so that already its atmosphere became more and more suitable for life. His chest swelled with pride as he stepped into the midst of them.

"I am Justin Picazo, First Prophet of Mars," he said, bowing in turn to each of the two gods. Then, standing before the goddess, he fainted.

IT WAS THE FINAL VISIT WITH JUSTIN THAT FELICIA WOULD ALWAYS remember as the turning point. Throughout the interview, Justin clung to his delusion against all data to the contrary.

"I'm still on Mars," he muttered, eyes closed against the impossible surroundings. Felicia sat in the bedside chair, watching his hands as they screw themselves into such agonizing shapes.

She reached out and took his hand. "Yes," she whispered. "You must never doubt that."

He opened his eyes. "goddess?"

Felicia felt suddenly conscious of the watching cameras. "I'm here."

His searching eyes brought warmth to her face, but presently he closed them again. "Yes, that's it. I'm having another vision. Nothing but a vision."

She squeezed his hand more tightly.

"It's just that sometimes I sense that it's all wrong. Something—" His eyes flew open in terror.

"Shhh," she whispered. "It's OK. Relax. I'm with you, always." There, in his eyes, the edge of hysteria. Felicia remembered the records she had reviewed, records that revealed Justin's high intelligence, his resourcefulness, his ingenuity. To lose all that...

"Is there another truth?" he asked, his voice coarse. "Am I living a lie?"

"No," she hissed. "Justin, you must listen to me. You were put here for a reason. These are your people. You have a purpose on Mars. Never forget that."

She felt his eyes on her; she felt the eyes of the cameras.

"Soon," Felicia said, "your faith will be tested."

"WELL, AT LEAST WE'VE SEEN WHAT HAPPENS IF THEY FIND OUT." Paxton's face was lined with fatigue, and Felicia knew she couldn't look much better herself. She didn't remember the last time she had slept.

"What was that all about?"

Burket had been reviewing the monitor tapes of her interview with Justin.

"I'm just trying to ease the shock," Felicia said, averting her eyes. It wasn't Burket who bothered her; it was Paxton. His calm eyes rested on her. She could sense his concern.

"What you were doing," Burket continued, "was *encouraging* him. Now you've got him so screwed up he doesn't even believe his own eyes."

Felicia didn't answer. She knew she couldn't explain—not yet. She wasn't even sure she understood herself.

"I hope you don't expect me to let you get away with this." Burket's voice held a threatening tone, but Paxton didn't say anything at all.

WHEN FELICIA RETURNED TO THE SIMULATOR VAULT, HER MAIN concern was explaining Justin's absence. Search parties had been out most of the Martian day, and now dusk was approaching, pink and serene, and no sign of him had been found.

"I won't risk it," Serina was saying when the airlock cycled Felicia into the habitat. "We could lose the entire search party."

"So what do we do," Franklin protested, his plump face red with anger, "just leave him out there? You know what he represents to this mission."

Felicia noticed the uneasy silence. Torres glanced up at her nervously. Serina looked at the floor as she answered.

"The man has flipped. This religious fixation of his—"

"It's not a fixation," Franklin insisted. "Don't you know that by now? Don't all of you know?"

The rest of the Marsbase personnel fidgeted nervously or looked at the floor. Felicia felt the indecision. It was one of those moments when things hung in the balance, when a gentle push could change everything. It was the moment she had been waiting for.

"Aaron's right," Felicia said. "Justin has seen the way for us, the way for all of Mars. He is vital to everything we're accomplishing here."

Eyes on her. Human and electronic. *Burket*. Felicia tried to forget him and the others, tried to focus only on the moment, on shifting the balance just so.

"Are you saying you believe in his...visions, Dr. Wells?" Serina's tone held no sarcasm, only surprise. And now the others were exchanging glances. The change had begun.

"How else do you explain the discrepancies? The voices? I've ruled out disease. You can no longer blame hallucinations. Which one of you hasn't seen something, or heard something, that you cannot explain?"

That got them. Now they were murmuring among themselves, shaking their heads, looking at her with a new light in their eyes. Only Serina remained skeptical.

"I'm not here to have a religious awakening," said the expedition commander. "And it's irrelevant. The issue is Justin's survival."

"Exactly," Franklin insisted. "That's why we have to continue the search. All in favor?"

Most of them raised their hands or said, "Aye." Felicia felt a chill run through her body.

"This isn't a democracy," Serina snapped. "My decision stands. It's too dark out there. We'll resume the search in the morning."

Felicia relaxed. "A wise choice," she conceded. "We can't risk more lives. We must have faith in Justin's return."

Through the window, for the briefest instant, she saw the stars flicker.

"WHY ARE YOU *DOING* THIS? WHAT THE hell do you hope to accomplish?"

Felicia had slipped out during the sleep period, and the glare of the New Mexican sky, blue and cloudless, made her eyes water. She got up from the conference table and closed the blinds.

"I don't see why I have to answer to you, Dr. Burket. The last I remember, you favored just yanking them out of there with no preparation at all."

"*Preparation*? Preparation. You're calling it preparation. You're reinforcing the problem instead of defusing it."

"I'm just trying—"

"What is it, Wells? Some kind of power trip? Or are you testing out some theory of yours on those poor people?"

Felicia looked to Paxton for help, but the director's eyes held no sympathy. He regarded her silently, his brow furrowed and his lips slightly parted. She turned back to Burket.

"You called me in to do a job," she said, putting every possible ounce of restraint into her voice. "Why don't you just let me do it?"

Burket hissed. "At this rate, they'll be building a temple to you within the week. Must be heady stuff, being worshiped—eh, *goddess*?"

"I don't have to take this crap."

"And we don't have to let you go back in there."

Now she turned to the director once again, pleading with her eyes, hoping he would place more trust in her. For a long time Paxton met her gaze. Then, slowly, he turned to Burket.

"We'll give her two more days," he said softly, his hands flat on the table, palms down. "Then we'll try it your way."

Burket started to speak, but a silent stare from Paxton was all it took to send him, seething, out of the conference room.

"Thank you," Felicia said.

Paxton stood slowly, moving his bulk wearily toward the door. Without turning, he said, "Don't thank me yet. I may have just given you all the rope you need to hang yourself." He had already gone before Felicia realized she was trembling.

After the meeting, Felicia started preparing for her return. There would have to be a cover story, of course. Maybe she sneaked out to search for Justin; maybe he was knocked unconscious—that would account for his oxygen lasting so long. She was just wondering how she could prepare Justin for his return when the man himself flashed down the hallway and was gone.

Then another blur passed.

Burket.

"IT'S TIME WE SHATTERED THIS ILLUSION ONCE AND FOR ALL."

Dr. Alexander Burket stood in the middle of the open courtyard outside the main habitat of VR Marsbase 1. All the colonists except Sandra Burns were present, all suited against the false vacuum. Sandra had been delayed by a dust-storm on her return from collecting ore samples to the south. One of Paxton's manipulations, Felicia suspected. Of them all, Sandra was the most breakable.

"Don't listen to him," Felicia heard herself shout. It didn't even sound like her own voice anymore. Maybe Mars was rubbing off on her. Or maybe it had shown her the way to a new part of herself.

"You talked to me at Mission Control just hours ago!" Burket said, shouting her and laughing a laugh that hissed over the suit radio like a snake. "How do you explain *that*? Warp drive?"

Everyone was staring at him, their silvered visors silent and unrevealing. Torres was the first to turn toward Felicia.

"It was supposed to be a test," Felicia said, speaking faster than she was thinking. "They made you think he was on Earth, but all the while he was getting closer and closer on the ship, and they faked the delay times."

Now they were all looking at her. She felt an especially strong pair of eyes on her and looked up. There was Justin, his visor clear and revealing a face like an old American Indian's with a sweatband and long black hair. He nodded slowly, and a moment later so did most of the others.

"*She's lying!*" Burket screeched. "Can't you people see that? Why would we *test* you in this way? Look, haven't you even noticed that objects fall too fast for Mars' gravity?" As Burket spoke, he plucked a screwdriver from his suit's tool-belt so quickly that several of the colonists jerked back in alarm.

"Watch what happens when I drop this in Mars gravity—remember, three-eighths of Earth's." Burket's eyes sparkled defiantly, and he dropped the screwdriver.

Felicia smiled. It *did* seem to go slower, somehow. Maybe the video feed to their visors was being altered every time something fell or was dropped. But wouldn't Burket know about it? Then she thought of the gravity harnesses. The colonists unconsciously regarded them as part of their spacesuits, and the computer edited out the lines. No one ever seemed to notice how much heavier they felt inside the habitat. Still, if you knew the harness was there, you could always just reach up and unhook it.

She held her breath, hoping Burket didn't think of *that*.

He thought of something else instead.

"I DON'T UNDERSTAND," THE MEDIC SAID AS FELICIA AND PAXTON AND a number of the other VR Mars Support Team members looked on. The body of Alexander Burket lay beneath the MRI machine.

"What killed him?" Paxton asked.

The medic spoke without raising his eyes. "He opened his helmet." The corpse's face stared up, blue. "But that shouldn't have been fatal," Paxton objected. "Not so quickly."

"It wasn't," said the medic. "But on some level he must have believed it would be. This man wasn't killed by the simulator. He simply stopped breathing."

THE ORDER CAME DOWN THAT NO ONE was to enter VR Marsbase 1 without the express order of the vice president. Felicia heard the news on her way to meet

Paxton in the forward observation area, and her first reaction was relief. She thought it meant they understood, up in Washington, that they knew the human price being paid by the men and women of VR Marsbase 1.

Paxton wasted no time correcting her.

"It's Burket's death," he said as the two of them gazed out on Mars through the one-way glass. The observation area was a small bubble extruding into the simulator vault. Tracking with the motion of the projected sun, the bubble was hidden in the glare to any observer on the surface.

"What does Burket's death have to do with it?" Felicia asked. Below them, wispy sands blew orange over the reddening landscape.

"I'm not supposed to be telling you this," Paxton said carefully. "The military's watching us now. They're interested in VR as a brain-washing technique."

"For Christ's sake," Felicia shook her head, saw in the glass how tired and gaunt her own face looked.

"It gets worse," Paxton said. "They have a special team en route to observe the operation. They'll be here in six hours."

Down there somewhere they slept, or they ate, or they toiled in the harsh environment. And they didn't have any idea what was happening out here.

"We have to do something," she whispered.

Paxton's reflection nodded. The director seemed to have resigned himself to something. He looked more at peace than she ever remembered. "The vice president will keep them in there God knows how long. Forever, if it suits NASA or the military. And each day compounds the damage."

Something tiny was moving through the dune fields to the north of the encampment. Felicia squinted, but she couldn't quite make it out. "I used to think it might be better for them to remain in such a fantasy world and live such larger-than-life lives. But the happiness they feel is false; it has nothing to do with the real world."

"That's not entirely true," Paxton objected. "I'm certain they will still be very proud of their accomplishment, once they have accepted reality."

The dust-laden air had reddened to the color of blood. Soon the observation bubble would set with the sun. "How do we bring them out?" Felicia asked. She'd entertained many ideas, some as radical as faking an air shortage so that, one by one, the Marsbase inhabitants "died," only to awaken in the real world. But each idea brought new problems.

"It should be slowly," Paxton was saying, "and in an ideal world it would be. We'd cover every contingency, monitor every reaction, back down when we hit a wrong nerve. But this *isn't* an ideal world. That team arrives in six hours. After that, such decisions will be made by Washington."

"They already are," Felicia pointed out.

"Officially," Paxton said.

"Are you suggesting..."

"We'll need some kind of pretext. Otherwise neither one of us will be seeing the outside of a prison cell for a very long time."

Felicia shivered. The object on the surface had finally been blown into view. A trash bag. Litter on Mars. Free associating, she had a sudden idea.

"We could chloroform them in their sleep. Then we could use hypnosis to help them remember what—"

The hatch to the observation bubble burst open. Felicia jumped, startled, but it was only a messenger. Paxton waved him out, then joined him beyond the hatchway. Felicia looked out on the darkening landscape as the messenger spoke to Paxton in tones too soft for her to hear. She placed her palm on the glass, withdrew it quickly; the glass was so cold it burned.

"We've got a new problem," Paxton said from over her shoulder. Rubbing her hand, Felicia turned. "There's been a coolant leak. Shouldn't have been possible, but it's contaminated the Marsbase air supply."

Felicia felt like someone had walked over her grave. "Better be careful what we wish for," she said quietly.

Paxton looked bewildered. "The backup air supply and the recycling equipment aren't responding to commands. Some kind of computer virus, they think. I have them trying to debug the system, but if the virus has gotten to the control software..."

"Director, this isn't a coincidence. You realize that."

Paxton nodded. "Burket. So he gets it his way after all."

"How do you mean?"

Night had come to Mars. In the dim light of Phobos, only the strongest lines of the landscape stood out against the shadows. The director's eyes never moved from that engulfing blackness as he spoke. "There's only one choice left to us. We have to open the dome."

Felicia's breath caught in her throat. She could think only of twenty pairs of eyes, tears flowing, twenty minds being broken in an instant.

"Please," she whispered. "Let me try one more thing first. We're talking about human wreckage here. We're talking about ruining twenty good people."

Paxton sighed. "The damage has already been done, hasn't it?"

"Perhaps. But maybe we can minimize it."

For a long time there was silence, and she felt certain his answer would be no. All along, Paxton had resisted taking action. Now, she feared, they had all waited far too long.

He surprised her.

"I won't ask what you intend. I know you've been preparing for something all along. Burket didn't understand it, and neither do I."

"It's better that way," Felicia said. "That way the responsibility is all my own."

Paxton moved nearer to her, and for an instant Felicia thought he would hug her. "Very well," he said quietly. "You've got one more shot at this thing. But when the time comes, I'll have no choice but to save my people—in the only way I know how."

Felicia kissed him on the cheek. She was already through the hatch before he had the chance to change his mind.

THE GODS TEST US IN STRANGE WAYS, JUSTIN PICAZO REFLECTED. HE felt amazingly unafraid. Surrounding him on the flat Martian plain, his fellow explorers milled around or talked in hushed tones in knots of two or three. Only Justin stood alone, his hands crossed in front of him, the telltales of his spacesuit giving false red and green hues to the starlit landscape beyond.

And the goddess.

You are truly a goddess, he told her in his thoughts. *As I always knew you were.*

She had come to him in the desert, alone, glorious in a halo of light. "The time has come," she had said. "You cannot live on Mars—it wasn't meant for you. Your destiny lies elsewhere."

He had fallen to his knees, for her gaze had become terrible, full of forbidden knowledge and frightening truths. But she had placed her hand on his shoulder and bidden him to rise.

"You are the Moses of your people. That is the role I have chosen for you. Only you possess the faith required to lead your people home."

"But how?" he had asked, his voice little more than a squeak.

"It will take a miracle," she had answered. "But you must lead your people back to the land of the blue sky, back to the land of oceans and forests and rain. Back to the promised land. Back to Earth."

His knees had trembled then, the weight had felt so great. "What if I'm not strong enough?" he'd asked.

But the goddess had only smiled. "Your strength lies in your faith. I know you will not fail me."

Tears stung Justin's eyes now, remembering. He knew then why it was that he was different from the others. Only he had seen the new lives that awaited them outside this egg of a world. Surely the gods had created all of this for some special purpose. And now, with her sudden return, and with the other shocking events, Justin sensed imminent change.

"Look to the sky," she had whispered to him before they had joined the others outside the habitat. Now, in the cold Martian night, he continued to look. Stars speckled the blackness. Earth was still up, but Venus had already set. Jupiter was eclipsed by Phobos. Diemos had once again raced over the horizon. But even as he marveled at the beauty, Justin felt a familiar sensation. Sometimes the sky seemed wrong; it always had. Some memory of gazing into infinity haunted his dreams, and this was nothing as splendidous as that.

Sometimes this sky hurt his head.

But tonight, Justin noticed none of this. "Look to the sky," she had said, and he looked. The sign would come soon, he knew. He saw it in vague smears of color painted by his mind's eye, but why was it that the colors brought such fear, such urgent terror?

A light started blinking on his suit's heads-up display. Justin heard the click as his oxygen mixture was automatically enriched.

I've got to relax, he told himself. It wasn't easy.

Since shortly after Felicia's return, Director Paxton had been on the radio. Earth was in line-of-sight, but something was very wrong, because the director's voice answered instantly in conversation, with no time lag.

Felicia had patched him into every helmet.

"No luck tracing that glitch. Burket did a thorough job."

That voice! It was one of the voices of the gods, one of the voices from his dreams. Only now it came from a man called Director and it spoke of impossible things.

"The air is contaminated," the goddess explained again. Everyone turned to look at her. Justin admired her poise before their intense stares, but he noticed a touch of fear when the corners of her mouth twitched.

What are you? he asked himself. *What is it that I've been worshipping?* But then he scolded himself for the thought. The goddess had always proven herself true. She could never fail him. *Would never fail him.*

Would she?

"Don't do this," he said softly. He'd switched to her private channel, and only her head turned toward him when he spoke. He could see tears sparkling in her eyes, and her forced smile broke his heart.

"We have to. Otherwise you'll all die." Her words sounded strange, almost alien.

"What do you mean?" asked Serina, speaking hotly and running her words together in her haste. "What do you mean, 'die'? What is it you have to do?"

Justin couldn't miss the fear in Serina's voice.

Paxton spoke, sounding as clear and nearby as any of the others. "There's been an accident. We have to get you back the quickest way we can."

That other place. Heaven. Only it wasn't heaven, was it? It was another world, a place somehow familiar and strange at the same time. And exciting. Justin felt the excitement most of all. How it would be, discovering all the wonders a new world could hold.

A flurry of voices bombarded Justin's ears, but he ignored it. This was the greatest moment of his life. He could feel that in every part of his being. Something wonderful was about to happen, something that would change them all.

He glanced up. Felicia was staring at him. When he caught her gaze, she nodded.

"I want you all to form a circle and join hands," Justin instructed, casting his voice loudly enough to cut through the chatter on the comm channel. For a moment he didn't think they had heard. Then,

tentatively, a few people began to move into position—first Sandra and Aaron, then Mbeche and Torres. Serina hesitated for an instant. She glanced at the goddess. Felicia nodded. Serina took one small step forward.

The circle was complete, with Justin at its center.

"I want you to remember the journey here," he said, trying to make his voice soothing to cover his own fear. "Remember landing on Mars. Remember setting up the habitat. Relax and let go of all other thoughts."

Mars may become the new body of humanity, but Earth remains the wet womb from whence came the human soul.

Justin remembered these thoughts now, and he remembered the thrill of looking down on Mars through the portholes of the descent capsule. Something inside him had come alive in that moment. Today he sensed the approach of a new birth.

Suddenly, it terrified him.

"Don't do this," he pleaded, switching back to the goddess' private channel. "Don't hurt us."

Now she didn't even look at him. She, too, was gazing upward. But he heard a small gasp, almost a sob. "I wish I could spare you this. Please, Justin, for the sake of the others."

Justin sighed. He switched back to the comm channel. "Now," he said to them all, "remember the Earth. Remember the blue skies and the morning mist. Remember the call of night birds and the patter of rain."

And in his mind, he *did* remember, and somehow he knew the others were feeling this too, that they were creating the Earth in their own imaginations.

"Make it real," he whispered. "Believe in it with all your hearts and souls. Take us there. Take us home."

Silence filled the night. Mars itself seemed to wait, its breath held, and in that moment Justin knew he had done it. They believed in him—all of them. Even Serina and the other skeptics. Now, at last, they all believed.

"That's it," Paxton interrupted, his voice sharp and urgent over the comm channel. "The toxicity's too high. And the suit air is almost exhausted. Get ready, everyone. We're cracking it."

"God help us," Justin heard the goddess say. They'd all joined the circle now, and twenty pairs of eyes glittered as they looked heavenward.

The sky opened.

THEY CAN'T SEE ME, FELICIA TOLD HERSELF. It just feels like they can. Through the one-way glass, she watched Justin sitting in a corner, his

face vacant. In a separate cubicle, Serina paced up and down like a caged lioness. And the others were here, too, some being interviewed by psychologists, others simply under observation. All she had to do was walk down the long glass-walled corridor of NASA's psychiatric unit to look in on whomever she chose.

It felt like she was violating them somehow.

"The cult deprogrammers have them now," she remembered Paxton saying when she had inquired about the team's fate. They'd been taken out of the simulator vault by chopper, and even before the dust had settled she had found herself under arrest. Now, a thousand miles away, Felicia Wells felt more helpless and uncertain than she ever had in her life.

She found a bench and sat down, averting her gaze from the one-way glass.

What would they do with her? This waiting was intolerable! If only they would just get it over with. Prison she could live with; limbo was maddening.

"It's all but routine now," Paxton had said. "These people have had plenty of practice deprogramming cult members. Some of them go as far back as Waco. It's all just a matter of time."

Felicia shook her head. Had she done enough? True, no one had

Continued on page 106

MAGIC BRUSH

The “perfect moments” of artist Tom Kidd

BY ALLAN COLE

THE COVER OF MY FIRST novel looked like a toilet plunger. That book was *Sten*. Things got better. Ten years later the eighth and final volume, *End of Empire*, appeared. Sten himself was on the cover—looking like Dan Quayle armed with a knife and a puzzled expression on his face.

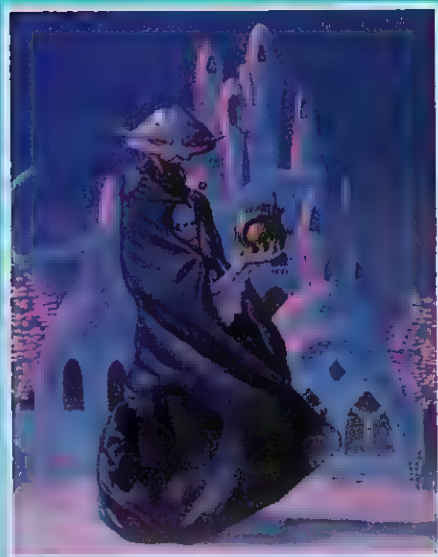
Next was the Vietnam War novel *A Reckoning For Kings*. Critically acclaimed. A literary first. The cover—hairy chests, bulging muscles, gallons of sweat. Moving on to *A Daughter of Liberty*. Well-researched, historical significance, serious intent. Once again the cover bit me—Colonial B-girl, low-cut bodice, plenty of pulchritude to fill it. Oh Lord.



Krenkelplatz is a tribute to the late artist Roy Krenkel, who was a master of the exotic locale.



BELOW: His cover painting for Joan Vinge's *Eyes of Amber* reminds the artist of old two-color covers for *The Saturday Evening Post*. RIGHT: *Sloane Air Show* is part of Kidd's vast work-in-progress being produced under his alter ego of Gnemo. BOTTOM: *Marooned in Real Time*, for the book by Vernon Vinge, was inspired by the volcanic landscapes of Frederick E. Church.



I became resigned. There must be some unwritten law, I thought, forbidding good covers on books bearing my name.

Then lightning cracked, the heavens parted, and out stepped Tom Kidd. In the guise of his alter ego, Gnemo, he swept away the gloom with his magic brush. And I was introduced to a man I consider the most extraordinary genre artist of his time.

The book was *The Far Kingdoms*, my fantasy debut. It told a tale of a grand adventure—an expedition along the lines of Marco Polo's travels or Sir Richard Burton's search for the source of the Nile. And for the first time my byline was on a book graced with a cover that equaled or bettered the 200,000 words it contained.

Kidd, working as Gnemo, crystallized the entire novel in a single painting. In every journey there is a moment just before arrival when the dreamed-of goal is in sight. The trials of that journey are past. Any disappointments or sorrows still lie ahead. But on that hazy ridge of past and future all your dreams seem to have come true. It is that moment Kidd seized. His painting shows a graceful ship bearing the hero of his long-sought goal. The ship sails up the mirrored surface of a magical river toward



a glorious floating city just emerging from the mists of dawn.

Others apparently agreed with my estimation, for the painting won the much-coveted Chesley Award for best hardcover work of the year. And I have no doubt it had much to do with the worldwide success the novel met when it appeared in bookstores in locations ranging from New York to Moscow.

His cover painting for the second book in the four-volume Antero series, *The Warrior's Tale*, was its equal. He chose the tale-turning moment when an awesome magical storm threatens our fleet of adventurers as they dare the deadly reefs known as "The Giant's Dice." In the third novel, *Kingdoms of the Night*, Kidd somehow managed to top the other two. Here, Amalric Antero finally reaches the true Far Kingdoms. The painting shows an ancient court watched over by a baleful-eyed king and his conspiring queen. In the center a magical dancer in a gossamer gown seduces the Demon King. He has just thrown her a red rose, whose petals shatter on the stage. It has been called by those whose business it is to know such things "simply the best fantasy cover ever."

I've just received a small photo of the painting that will illustrate the concluding volume—

The Warrior Returns—when it appears next year. In my judgment, it's better still, although I wouldn't have thought such a thing possible. But it will soon be there for all to see.

HAVING SAID THAT, I MUST NOW confess through envy-clenched teeth that when the heavens parted and Kidd stepped out it was not just for me. He's created paintings for more than two hundred books in his career, been nominated four times for the Hugo, captured yet another Chesley Award, conjured decks of magic cards and is now charging his wand with work in multimedia and CD-ROM. His paintings are much sought after by knowledgeable collectors. And he's so busy that it took some groveling and pleas of friendship to get him to do my last cover.

When I called for the particulars for this piece I got the typically atypical details that make up an artist's life. Born in Tampa, Florida, he was five when his talents were first noticed. He told me, "When my family said, 'Wow, did you do that?' And then—'Did you trace it?' I shyly pointed out that my picture was bigger than the original, so I couldn't

have traced it." A lengthy illness (encephalitis) struck when he was six. "I had *petit mal* seizures after that," he said. "They gave me strong drugs to control it. The drugs and the things I saw had a major affect on me as an artist." He grew up surrounded by science fiction. "My mother," he said, "used to wake us up to see *Outer Limits*. Which was a pretty cool thing for a mom to do."

His older brother, Sam, had a huge SF library. Kidd told me: "Sam said, 'That stuff on TV is nothing! The books are a helluva lot better!'" The two brothers drew constantly, competing with one another. "We were just playing around," Kidd said. "You know, aliens and spaceships and things from the books."

But he didn't decide on his life's work until a little later. "I didn't like the stuff I was seeing in art class," he confessed. Then he was introduced to Norman Rockwell, Howard Pyle, and N.C. Wyeth. "When I saw their work I knew that's what I really wanted to do."

One of his closest friends, then and now, was John Pierard, who also became a prominent illustrator. "We started drawing and competing together, like Sam and I used to do," he said. "But on a much more sophisticated level."

Kidd won a scholarship to Syracuse University, but he left after two years to tackle

Kidd grew up in love with Heinlein's *Starship Troopers*, and based this painting (for Fred Saberhagen's *Earth Descended*) on his memories of that novel's battle armor. **OPPOSITE ABOVE:** *Kingdom of the Night*, co-written by Chris Bunch and the author of this Gallery, is now on the stands. **OPPOSITE BELOW:** If you see the original artwork for Mack Reynold's and Dean Ing's *Trojan Orbit*, please alert the artist—it was one of twelve paintings stolen from a university show.





the university of life. Which meant many years of struggling and going without. "I had lots of promises for jobs," he told me. "When I got to New York, the science fiction market had just collapsed. The editors said, 'I know I promised you. But now I'm afraid my own job is going to be cut!'"

With the strong support and counsel of his wife, Andrea, he struggled for many years doing work he considered distasteful before his breakthrough at the then newly established Tor Books. He gives much credit to Tom Doherty and Jim Baen for recognizing his worth. Time passed. Success followed success. And then Kidd took what is to me a most intriguing path. He created his alter ego (Or was it the other way around?), whom he calls Gnemo. (Named for Windsor McCay's *Little Nemo* character with a silent G attached. Nemo, of course, means no one.) It was as Gnemo that he painted the cover for *The Far Kingdoms* and the other three books of the Antero series. Gnemo is also the protagonist of the richly illustrated book he is laboring on in which an itinerant street artist travels a strange time warp galaxy painting that he sees during his adventures. It seems I was fortunate enough for Gnemo to spot *The Far Kingdoms* in his journeys, which led to the parted heavens business.

All of his work, whether he's painting as Tom Kidd, Gnemo, or Newell Convers (paying homage to N.C. Wyeth), is rich in color, light, and depth. My wife has called him a modern day Arthur Rackham. Yet there is something far beyond that surface beauty and technical excellence. Which takes me back to beginning, when I praised his ability to find the perfect moment that captures the very heart of the book. In my view, this is the greatest marvel.



"For me," he said, "every book has a definite feel to it. An impression that affects me deeply when I've finished reading it. I try to find all the things that formed that impression. And I try to pull it all together into a single emotion. And then I attempt to find something in the story reflecting that emotion. Something you have a strong reaction to. And

that's what I paint."

And that, to me, is the perfect description of the torch that lights the way to all great art.

Tom Kidd's recently released works include FPG's Tom Kidd trading cards and Second Nature Software's "Wizard and Wonders" screensavers. □

With the sinking of Prince Charles' royal yacht, it became time for that noble castaway to look his destiny in the eye. And a very special eye at that...

TO SERVE A PRINCE

BY B.W. CLOUGH

Illustration by Gary Yealdhall

THE STORM WAS THE WORST ONE THAT THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN HAD endured this century, and the royal yacht *Britannia* was in trouble. The ship swooped up and down like a roller coaster on the wind-lashed waves. Down in the royal suite Charles, Prince of Wales, was damnably seasick. His cabin had big picture windows, but the waves scoured right up over them so they might as well have been portholes. And the way the curtains swayed back and

forth—ugh! It'd make anybody queasy. "Can't you make this stop?" he demanded.

"Sorry, sir," the *Britannia's* captain said, a broad apology that covered the waves, the weather, and life in general all at once. "Weather conditions are worsening. We've radioed for assistance. I have to ask that you put this on, sir. Just in case."

The picture of restrained British fury, Prince Charles looked tight-lipped at the bright orange life jacket. "Surely you're joking, captain." "Just a precaution, sir—please! Her Majesty would wish it!"

This unnecessary appeal to the authority of his mother infuriated Charles even more. "Rather drown," he snapped.

It was an unfortunate choice of words, because the deck shuddered oddly under their feet. Somewhere below alarm bells began frantically ringing. "Quick!" the captain shouted.

Disregarding protocol, he leaped on Charles and stuffed the princely arms into the life jacket. A sailor burst into the room shouting, "She's sinking!"

"Save the prince!" the captain yelled. They hustled Charles out of the cabin just in time. The *Britannia* heeled over with a jerk, flinging all three of them across the deck like dice. Charles was so surprised that he made no effort to grab the railing as he hurtled over the side.

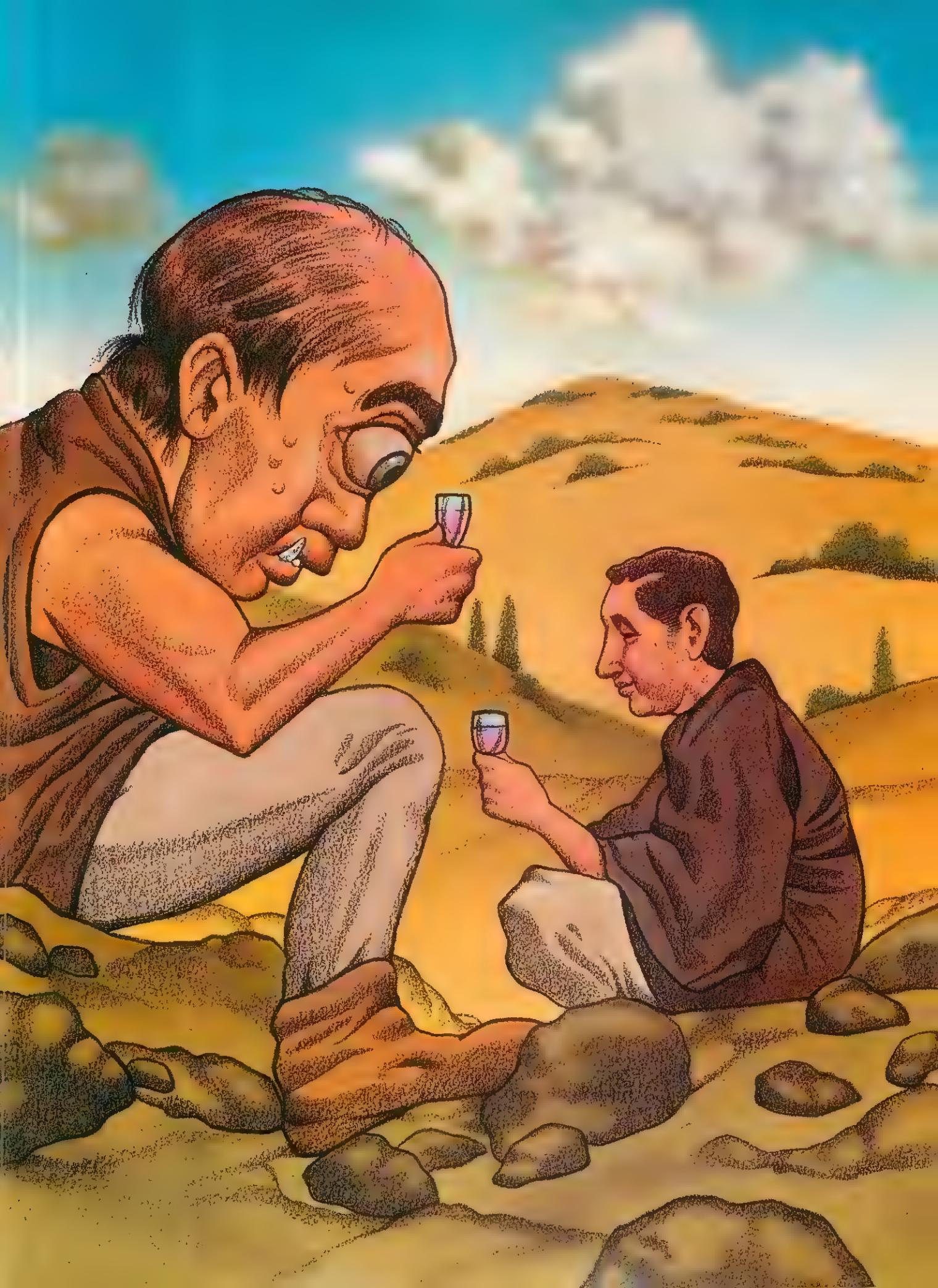
The Mediterranean was cold enough to make him gasp, and the dark waves were taller than mountains. A slashing downpour made

it difficult for Charles to breathe. Hastily he tightened the straps on his life jacket. He couldn't see the yacht anywhere, and night was coming on fast.

Charles had not experienced mortal peril before, and he didn't realize how lucky he was to be washed up onto a rocky shore before hypothermia set in. Must be an island, he thought; the seas around Greece are stiff with islands. His legs were so cold he couldn't stand. It would be undignified, however, for the Prince of Wales to crawl up the beach. He lay shivering in the surf, knowing that help would come because, for him, it always had. Unsurprised, he felt large horny hands grasping him, hauling him higher over the shingle. "Dash it, pick me up and *carry me!*" he commanded, and fainted.

CHARLES WOKE SLOWLY. A FIRE CRACKLED COZILY NEARBY. HE WAS DRY and warm, with something wooly tucked right up to his chin. His once-frozen feet rested on an enormous hot-water bottle in a wooly cover. Sleepily he imagined his rescuers, perhaps a pair of elderly Greek spinsters who knitted afghans and hot-water bottle jackets. He curled his toes into the luxurious nap of the bottle cover.

To his exquisite horror the hot-water bottle moved away! With a yell Charles sat bolt upright and heaved the covers off. "My god, it's a dog!" he cried. The big sheep dog shot him a disgusted look as it got up. With a disdainful allover shake of its curly brown pelt, the beast walked away.



Shivering, Charles huddled back into bed. The covers, he saw, were sheepskins tanned with the wool on. The bed was a crude wooden affair, no more than a box to hold the sheepskins in a heap. It stood at one end of a vast cave. The only light came from the big stone fireplace. Impossible to imagine a pair of nice old ladies knitting beside that fire!

He heard footsteps now, echoing from the far end of the cave. Resisting the urge to pull the sheepskins over his head, Charles tried to see past the glow of the fire. The approaching figure seemed fairly ordinary, rather on the plump side perhaps, carrying a toy oil lamp in one hand. Then, with a terrible adjustment of perspective, Charles saw that the oil lamp was normal-sized. It was the hand holding the lamp that was enormous. The fellow must be fifteen feet tall. Slowly Charles raised his eyes to the giant's face, and almost fainted again with the shock.

"Phylax the dog said you were awake," the giant growled. "So you recognize me. Just say it, OK? Get it over with."

Charles opened his mouth but no words came out. Diplomacy, that was the ticket. The famous British tact. He swallowed and tried again. "You're one of—of, uh, the binocularly impaired."

The monster clapped a huge three-fingered hand to its bald head. "Oh for dumb! I'm a *Cyclops*, dammit! Haven't you read the *Odyssey*?"

"In school," Charles stuttered. Unpleasant memories of the Homeric epic returned to him. "You're shepherds—and cannibals!" But a Prince of Wales cannot dive under the covers and scream for mercy; it simply isn't done. Even if the creature meant to eat him on the spot, he had to assert himself. "And I presume you recognize me."

"Yeah, yeah, we get satellite TV. You should just marry Camilla and get it over with. Show Princess Di where she gets off, dissing you."

Charles winced, as he always did at his ex's name. "So perhaps you plan to hold me for ransom, rather than serving me up on a platter, eh?"

"Don't count on it," the Cyclops growled. It stared at Charles from under its single shelflike eyebrow. "You'll have to make yourself useful somehow."

"My pleasure." Charles threw back the sheepskins and got up. It put him at a psychological disadvantage to be in bed, he thought. He found he was wearing a faded red sweatsuit, a nasty change from his usual hand-tailored suits. "Just indicate your wishes," he said a little bitterly. "I oblige the entire British nation; a few Greek mythical figures shouldn't be too difficult."

"Don't gimme that! At least you got a *role* in life!" The Cyclops picked up something from the mantel and tossed it to Charles. "Here, take these—the floors are way cold, it's the big hassle of cave life."

Charles flinched and let them drop—the items looked like feet, a pair of large human feet cut off at the ankles. But when he picked them up, with an effort, they were only sheepskin slippers with the fleece turned in. He stepped into them and followed the Cyclops down the cave. "Oh, come now," he said rallying, hoping to keep the conversation going. "Don't Cyclops have a role?"

"Sure, one that's four thousand years out of date. Homer didn't do us any favor, you know—we came off as *dumb*."

"But scary too."

"Yeah, dumb and scary and shepherds. Whoopee. What do you think of, when you think of shepherds? What's the first image that pops into your head?"

It was January, so Charles didn't need to think very far back. He'd sat through no fewer than fourteen Christmas pageants last month in the course of his duties, a schedule guaranteed to shrivel anyone's holiday spirit. "Bethlehem," he said promptly. "While shepherds watch their flocks by night. Away in the manger, no crib for a bed."

The Cyclops stopped. "Actually, Christmas wouldn't be a bad gig. Seasonal appearances get you exposure every year. Like the way the leprechauns hijacked March 17th. Nah, what am I saying? One of us tried it a few centuries ago—sneaked into a Nativity fresco with a lamb under his arm. Total fiasco—they painted him over into a Wise Man." The Cyclops began walking again, shaking his head.

"Let me get this straight," Charles said. "You Cyclops are searching for a, shall we say, niche in the popular imagination?"

They turned a corner into a smaller, more comfortable cave, furnished with a Greek flokati rug, a battered cafe table, and a pair of old bentwood chairs. An old-fashioned wood-fired cookstove was crowded on top with kettles and pots from which delicious smells rose. Charles sat in a bentwood chair. He had skipped lunch due to seasickness and now felt distinctly hungry.

Without paying much attention to its work, the Cyclops set two plates out, produced cutlery and cloth napkins from a cupboard, and poured out two glasses of red wine, talking all the time. "Damn straight we need a niche. There's nothing deader than yesterday's folklore figure, just ask Paul Bunyan. And we're from the day before yesterday. The trick is to make the transition, you know? Without losing anything essential."

"And you say other legendary folk have made this jump successfully," Charles said in the encouraging, interested tone a Royal picks up at his nanny's knee. "I believe you mentioned leprechauns."

"You wanna know the real success story? The Nereids. And their cousins, the Dryads and Hamadryads."

"I beg your pardon?"

"They're the nymphs of oceans and trees and streams. You've had dinner with one, I saw it on CNN. Look!"

The Cyclops reached a big coffee-table book down from the cupboard. Charles stared astonished at the glossy dust cover, which had a photo of a huge curving ocean wave, very blue, on the front. On the back the author, a dishy blonde in a Givenchy dress, stood in front of a yacht. "*Our Living Waters*? But I know her—Constance Bedlington! She's on the Birthday Honors short list, for her antipollution work!"

"Told you! She and the other Nereids have a lock on the clean water stuff. The Greenpeace people, all those groups that monitor oil spills, shampoo greased-up sea otters, save whales, and hug trees—nymphs pack all their governing boards. There are Nereids running water purification plants, Dryads lobbying against clear-cutting Amazon rainforests, and Hamadryads lecturing at universities on wastewater treatment policy. It's enough to make a Cyclops sick with envy."

Charles shook his head in wonder. "Connie Bedlington, a Nereid. Amazing!" He took another sip of wine.

The Cyclops refilled both glasses. "OK, chow time." Charles hid his nervousness as the monster brought a serving dish over from the stove. Suppose it was *human* meat? But the dish was an appetizer, fried calamari—the crisp little brown rings of squid were plainly visible. Charles picked up his fork. "So you eat squid, huh?" the Cyclops said.

"Of course—and these are scrumptious."

The Cyclops grinned with pleasure at the compliment. "Lots of folks won't, the wimps."

The sight of its sharp shark-teeth almost made Charles knock his glass over. "I'm used to eating all kinds of things," he said, recovering quickly. "Part of the job, being Prince of Wales. I ate a boiled rat once, in Cameroon."

"A rat? My god!" The Cyclops shuddered all over. "Better you than me, pal!"

"Only one bite," Charles said gloomily. "If I'd jibbed, the diplomatic scandal would have been indescribable." He helped himself to more calamari, to get the memory out of his mouth.

"Don't fill up on that," the Cyclops warned. "There's bouillabaisse to follow, and pigeon pie."

"No human stew, eh?" Charles drained his glass.

The Cyclops looked embarrassed. "That was Homer's idea, you know. Trashed our image completely. We could've got over being one-eyed—look how the satyrs managed their goat legs. But people don't like people who eat people, no denying it."

"What are the satyrs into these days?" Charles asked, fascinated.

"Porn, mostly. You don't believe the male stars in those films are really human, do you? The hassle of shaving goat hair off my legs and haunches every day would put *me* off, but they don't seem to mind. Here, you open this white, while I dish up the bouillabaisse."

Charles had never opened a wine bottle before—the servants did that—but now was the time to learn. The cork broke into pieces

when he forced the corkscrew in, and he had to fish the crumbs out of his glass with a fork. The Cyclops pretended not to see his awkwardness, though. Charles decided that Homer had really had the wrong end of the stick—Cyclops were instinctively hospitable. He sniffed the rich garlicky steam rising from his plate and picked up his spoon. “So what kind of job were you Cyclops contemplating?” he asked.

The Cyclops pulled a clam from its shell and chewed it thoughtfully. “I was sort of toying with the idea of starting a Cyclops rap group.” He fixed Charles with a one-eyed gaze.

Charles kept his face absolutely serious. “Do you sing?”

“Rap doesn’t involve singing. I figured if we wore baseball caps turned to one side folks might not even notice our eyes.” The Cyclops put an imaginary cap on, pulling the bill down and to one side of his face.

“Every rap group that I’ve seen has been African-American,” Charles said tactfully. “Perhaps skin color’s not a difficulty for figures of legend.”

“Well, yeah, it is. No such thing as a black Cyclops. We’re all pasty white—must come of living in caves.” The Cyclops mopped his bowl out with a piece of bread. “You about ready for that pigeon pie?”

THE CYCLOPS pulled a clam from its shell and chewed it thoughtfully. “I was sort of toying with the idea of starting a Cyclops rap group.” He fixed Charles with a one-eyed gaze.

“Looking forward to it. Oh, and a red wine to go with, delightful!” This time Charles opened the bottle deftly and poured the new wine out with justifiable pride. The Cyclops congratulated him and set a large dish down. The glazed and shining piecrust had a unicorn design pressed into the pastry. Charles applauded. “By gum, it’s a masterpiece. Could be on a gourmet magazine’s cover.”

“Well, I’ve always admired the pictures in *Food & Wine*,” the Cyclops admitted. It served Charles a portion and watched him anxiously as he took a bite.

“Delicious!” Charles pronounced. “There’s something in the sauce, is it basil?”

“And marjoram,” the Cyclops said. “But I bet you eat as good every day, at home.”

“You’d lose your bet,” Charles sighed. “England is famous for its horrible food.”

The Cyclops blinked its eye in surprise. “No kidding? That’s terrible! But you’re the prince, the heir to the throne. Can’t you just wave your scepter and say, ‘I want roast duck for dinner’?”

Halfway down the fourth bottle of wine, Charles let it all hang out. “It’d be lukewarm by the time the food hit the plate—the kitchen is so far from the dining room in a palace. Not like your charming cave here.”

“It is convenient,” the Cyclops said modestly.

“And I don’t have a scepter. May never have one. My mother will be Queen of England until she dies. By then I’ll be an old man.”

“That’s terrible. And what’re you going to do, between now and then?”

“The usual routine. Cut ribbons at supermarket openings. Give speeches to mayoral assemblies. Listen to preschool choirs sing ‘The Little Drummer Boy.’ Press the flesh at old age homes. You should’ve rescued a shipwrecked MP if you want help,” Charles concluded sadly. “Or Steven Spielberg. The Prince of Wales is just a figurehead. Powerless.”

“Oh, don’t say that,” the Cyclops said, tears brimming in its eye. “Your people like you.”

“They like my ex-wife more.” Charles knew he was getting maudlin, a privilege he could very rarely allow himself. But his host was in no better shape, snuffling dolefully into its napkin. And a Cyclops was

perhaps the safest confidant on earth. “To tell the truth, I envy your situation,” Charles continued. “We’re both of us anachronisms. Freaks looking for a role. But once you find your niche, I just know you Cyclops will make your mark in the world. I may never do so.”

“Oh, you will,” the Cyclops sobbed. “I’ll help you, if you need it.”

“Would you? Really?”

“Of course!” The Cyclops extended a three-fingered hand the size of a typewriter and, seizing Charles’ hand, pumped it up and down. “Anything! I promise!”

Charles was almost jerked out of his seat by the vigor of the handshake. “You’re too kind,” he said. “And I am indeed going to lend a hand in your problem, too. The least I can do, for my rescuer. Suppose—” Looking around for inspiration, Charles’ gaze fell on the immense pigeon pie. “Suppose you moved to England and gave my chef some hints? Can all you Cyclops cook so wonderfully?”

“Well, sure, but—you mean, cooking? As a job?” The Cyclops’ sharklike mouth dropped in amazement. “Hey, we only play around amongst ourselves—we couldn’t cook like pros!”

“You already do, believe me!” Recklessly Charles drained his glass and poured more for both of them. “I’ve got it now. I’ll go on ahead and sack the kitchen staff at Balmoral. That’s the Scottish castle

where my family holidays. Then you Cyclops follow along to take up the jobs. Scotland’s a lot like Greece, mountainous and full of sheep, you’d fit right in. If all goes well, a few of you could branch out a bit in a couple years—start a restaurant, open a B & B, write a cookbook—I could write you a foreword. Maybe get on the telly with a cooking show....” The entire scheme seemed to leap, fully grown, from Charles’ head.

The Cyclops goggled at him, if a single eye may be said to goggle. “Are you *sure*? You don’t think that being fifteen feet tall and one-eyed will spoil people’s appetite?”

“No one will see you in the kitchen,” Charles pointed out. “On your TV show you could stand in a trench on the set, to hide your height—actors do that. You could even bring Phylax the sheep dog. Englishmen love people who love dogs.”

The Cyclops jumped up, overturning his chair, and enveloped Charles in a bear hug. “That’s fantastic. You’re brilliant. We’ll be in your debt forever. And don’t think I’ve forgotten your problem. We’ll reform British cooking if it kills us. And you’re gonna get the credit. You’ll go down in history as the prince who gave England a cuisine.”

Tears rose in Charles’ eyes, too. “You do that,” he said, “and Connie Bedlington won’t be the only mythological figure on the Honors List.”

An hour later Charles stood on the rocky shore again while the Cyclops brought around its motorized fishing boat. The storm had almost blown away, with only ravelings of cloud scudding across the moon’s face. Charles’ hands were clasped behind his back in his customary stance. He was still a couple sheets to the wind, but his head was clear. There was no reason why the relationship shouldn’t be mutually profitable. Palace employees had an excellent dental plan, so the Cyclops could get its shark-teeth capped before kicking off its TV career. And Charles could dine, at last, like a prince, for the rest of his life.

It occurred to him that he had even done Odysseus King of Ithaca one in the eye. Charles of England had escaped from a Cyclops too, and without any ungentlemanly poking about with sharpened stakes either. Just sympathetic conversation, solid British diplomacy, and four bottles of good Greek wine. “To each hero his own weapons,” Charles said aloud with satisfaction. □

Stranded on the frigid surface of Pluto, their food and oxygen running low, Cobh and Lvov make a startling discovery. But will it save them? Or destroy them?

THE FLITTER BUCKED. Lvov looked up from her data desk, startled. Beyond the flitter's translucent hull, the wormhole was flooded with sheets of blue-white light which raced toward and past the flitter, giving Lvov

the impression of huge, uncontrolled speed.

"We've got a problem," Cobh said. The pilot bent over her own data desk, a frown creasing her thin face.

Lvov had been listening to her data desk's synthesized murmur on temperature inversion layers in nitrogen atmospheres; now she tapped the desk to shut it off. The flitter was a transparent tube, deceptively warm and comfortable. Impossibly fragile. *Astronauts have problems in space*, she thought. *But not me. I'm no hero; I'm only a researcher*. Lvov was twenty-eight years old; she had no plans to die—and certainly not during a routine four-hour hop through a Poole wormhole that had been human-rated for eighty years.

She clung to her desk, her knuckles whitening, wondering if she ought to feel scared.

Cobh sighed and pushed her data desk away; it floated before her. "Close up your suit and buckle up."

"What's wrong?"

"Our speed through the wormhole has increased." Cobh pulled her own restraint harness around her. "We'll reach the terminus in another minute—"

"What? But we should have been traveling for another half-hour."

Cobh looked irritated. "I know that. I think the Interface has become unstable. The wormhole is buckling."

"What does that mean? Are we in danger?"

Cobh checked the integrity of Lvov's pressure suit, then pulled her data desk to her. Cobh was a Caucasian, strong-faced, a native of Mars, perhaps fifty years old. "Well, we can't turn back. One way or the other it'll be over in a few more seconds. Hold tight."

Now Lvov could see the Interface itself, the terminus of the wormhole. The Interface was a blue-white tetrahedron, an angular cage that exploded at her from infinity.

Glowing struts swept over the flitter.

The craft hurtled out of the collapsing wormhole. Light founted around the fleeing craft, as stressed spacetime yielded in a gush of heavy particles.

Lvov glimpsed stars, wheeling.

Cobh dragged the flitter sideways, away from the energy fount—

There was a *lurch*, a discontinuity in the scene beyond the hull. Suddenly a planet loomed before them.

"Lethe," Cobh said. "Where did that come from? I'll have to take her down—we're too close."

Lvov saw a flat, complex landscape, gray-crimson in the light of a swollen moon. The scene was dimly lit, and it rocked wildly as the flitter tumbled. And, stretching between world and moon, she saw...

No. It was impossible.

The vision was gone, receded into darkness.

"Here it comes," Cobh yelled.

Foam erupted, filling the flitter. The foam pushed into Lvov's ears, mouth, and eyes; she was blinded, but she found she could breathe.

She heard a collision, a grinding that lasted seconds, and she imagined the flitter ploughing its way into the surface of the planet. She felt a hard lurch, a rebound.

The flitter came to rest.

A synthesized voice emitted blurred safety instructions. There was a ticking as the hull cooled.

In the sudden stillness, still blinded by foam, Lvov tried to recapture what she had seen. *Spider web. It was a web, stretching from the planet to its moon.*

"Welcome to Pluto." Cobh's voice was breathless, ironic.

LVOV STOOD ON THE SURFACE OF PLUTO.

The suit's insulation was good, but enough heat leaked to send nitrogen clouds hissing around her footsteps, and where she walked she burned craters in the ice. Gravity was

only a few percent of G, and Lvov, Earth-born, felt as if she might blow away.

There were clouds above her: wispy cirrus, aerosol clusters suspended in an atmosphere of nitrogen and methane. The clouds occluded bone-white stars. From here, Sol and the moon, Charon, were hidden by the planet's bulk, and it was *dark*, dark on dark, the damaged landscape visible only as a sketch in starlight.

The flitter had dug a trench a mile long and fifty yards deep in this world's antique surface, so Lvov was at the bottom of a valley walled by nitrogen ice. Cobh was hauling equipment out of the crumpled-up wreck of the flitter: scooters, data desks, life-support boxes, Lvov's equipment. Most of the stuff had been robust enough to survive the impact, Lvov saw, but not her own equipment.

Maybe a geologist could have crawled around with nothing more than a hammer and a set of sample bags. But Lvov was an atmospheric scientist. What was she going to achieve here without her equipment?

Her fear was fading now, to be replaced by irritation, impatience. She was five light-hours from Sol; already she was missing the online nets. She kicked at the ice. She was *stuck* here; she couldn't talk to anyone, and there wasn't even the processing power to generate a Virtual environment.

Cobh finished wrestling with the wreckage. She was breathing hard. "Come on," she said. "Let's get out of this ditch and take a look around." She showed Lvov how to work a scooter. It was a simple platform, its inert gas jets controlled by twists of raised handles.

Side by side, Cobh and Lvov rose out of the crash scar.

Pluto ice was a rich crimson laced with organic purple. Lvov made out patterns, dimly, on the surface of the ice; they were like bas-relief, discs the size of dinner plates, with the intricate complexity of snowflakes.

Lvov landed clumsily on the rim of the crash scar, the scooter's blunt prow crunching into surface ice, and she was grateful for the low gravity. The weight and heat of the scooters quickly obliterated the ice patterns.

BY STEPHEN BAXTER

Illustration by Mark Maxwell

GOSSAMER



"We've come down near the equator," Cobh said. "The albedo is higher at the south pole; a cap of methane ice there, I'm told."

"Yes."

Cobh pointed to a bright blue spark, high in the sky. "That's the wormhole Interface, where we emerged, fifty thousand miles away."

Lvov squinted at constellations unchanged from those she'd grown up with on Earth. "Are we stranded?"

Cobh said, with reasonable patience, "For the time being. The flitter is wrecked, and the wormhole has collapsed; we're going to have to go back to Jupiter the long way round."

Three billion miles... "Ten hours ago I was asleep in a hotel room on Io. And now this. What a mess."

Cobh laughed. "I've already sent off messages to the Inner System. They'll be received in about five hours. A one-way GUTship will be sent to retrieve us. It will refuel here, with Charon ice—"

"How long?"

"It depends on the readiness of a ship. Say ten days to prepare, then a ten-day flight out here—"

"Twenty days?"

"We're in no danger. We've supplies for a month. Although we're going to have to live in these suits."

"Lethe. This trip was supposed to last seventy-two hours."

"Well," Cobh said testily, "you'll have to call and cancel your appointments, won't you? All we have to do is wait here; we're not going to be comfortable, but we're safe enough."

"Do you know what happened to the wormhole?"

Cobh shrugged. She stared up at the distant blue spark. "As far as I know, nothing like this has happened before. I think the Interface itself became unstable, and that fed back into the throat... But I don't know how we fell to Pluto so quickly. That doesn't make sense."

"How so?"

"Our trajectory was spacelike. Superluminal." She glanced at Lvov obliquely, as if embarrassed. "For a moment there, we appeared to be traveling faster than light."

"Through normal space? That's impossible."

"Of course it is." Cobh reached up to scratch her cheek, but her gloved fingers rattled against her faceplate. "I think I'll go up to the Interface and take a look around there."

COBH SHOWED LVV HOW TO ACCESS THE LIFE SUPPORT BOXES. Then she strapped her data desk to her back, climbed aboard her scooter, and lifted off the planet's surface, heading for the Interface. Lvov watched her dwindle.

Lvov's isolation closed in. She was alone, the only human on the surface of Pluto.

A reply from the Inner System came within twelve hours of the crash. A GUTship was being sent from Jupiter. It would take thirteen days to refit the ship, followed by an eight-day flight to Pluto, then more delay in taking on fresh reaction mass at Charon. Lvov chafed at the timescale, restless.

There was other mail: concerned notes from Lvov's family, a testy demand for updates from her research supervisor, and for Cobh, orders from her employer to mark as much of the flitter wreck as she could for salvage and analysis. Cobh's ship was a commercial wormhole transit vessel, hired by Oxford—Lvov's university—for this trip. Now, it seemed, a complex battle over liability would be joined between Oxford, Cobh's firm, and the insurance companies.

Lvov, five light-hours from home, found it difficult to respond to the mail asynchronously. She felt as if she had been cut out of the online mind of humanity. In the end, she drafted replies to her family and deleted the rest of the messages.

She checked her research equipment again, but it really was unusable. She tried to sleep. The suit was uncomfortable, claustrophobic. She was restless, bored, a little scared.

She began a systematic survey of the surface, taking her scooter on widening spiral sweeps around the crash scar.

The landscape was surprisingly complex, a starlit sculpture of feathery ridges and fine ravines. She kept a few hundred feet above

the surface; whenever she flew too low, her heat evoked billowing vapor from fragile nitrogen ice, obliterating ancient features, and she experienced obscure guilt.

She found more of the snowflake-like features, generally in little clusters of eight or ten.

Pluto, like its moon-twin Charon, was a ball of rock clad by thick mantles of water ice and nitrogen ice, and laced with methane, ammonia, and organic compounds. It was like a big, stable comet nucleus; it barely deserved the status of "planet." There were *moons* bigger than Pluto.

There had been only a handful of visitors in the eighty years since the building of the Poole wormhole. None of them had troubled to walk the surfaces of Pluto or Charon. The wormhole, Lvov realized, hadn't been built as a commercial proposition, but as a sort of stunt: the link which connected, at last, all of the System's planets to the rapid-transit hub at Jupiter.

She tired of her plodding survey. She made sure she could locate the crash scar, lifted the scooter to a mile above the surface, and flew toward the south polar cap.

COBH CALLED FROM THE INTERFACE. "I THINK I'M FIGURING OUT what happened here—that superluminal effect I talked about. Lvov, have you heard of an Alcubierre wave?" She dumped images to Lvov's desk—portraits of the wormhole Interface, graphics. "No." Lvov ignored the input and concentrated on flying the scooter. "Cobh, why should a wormhole become unstable? Hundreds of wormhole rapid transits are made every day, all across the System."

"A wormhole is a flaw in space. It's inherently unstable anyway. The throat and mouths are kept open by active feedback loops involving threads of exotic matter. That's matter with a negative energy density, a sort of antigravity which—"

"But this wormhole went wrong."

"Maybe the tuning wasn't perfect. The presence of the flitter's mass in the throat was enough to send the wormhole over the edge. If the wormhole had been more heavily used, the instability might have been detected earlier, and fixed...."

Over the gray-white pole, Lvov flew through banks of aerosol mist; Cobh's voice whispered to her, remote, without meaning.

SUNRISE ON PLUTO:

Sol was a point of light, low on Lvov's unfolding horizon, wreathed in the complex strata of a cirrus cloud. The Sun was a thousand times fainter than from Earth, but brighter than any planet in Earth's sky.

The Inner System was a puddle of light around Sol, an oblique disc small enough for Lvov to cover with the palm of her hand. It was a disc that contained almost all of man's hundreds of billions. Sol brought no heat to her raised hand, but she saw faint shadows, cast by the sun on her faceplate.

The nitrogen atmosphere was dynamic. At perihelion—the closest approach to Sol which Pluto was nearing—the air expanded, to three planetary diameters. Methane and other volatiles joined the thickening air, sublimating from the planet's surface. Then, when Pluto turned away from Sol and sailed into its two-hundred-year winter, the air snowed down.

Lvov wished she had her atmospheric analysis equipment now; she felt its lack like an ache.

She passed over spectacular features: Buie Crater, Tombaugh Plateau, the Lowell Range. She recorded them all, walked on them.

After a while, her world, of Earth and information and work, seemed remote, a glittering abstraction. Pluto was like a complex, blind fish, drifting around its two-century orbit, gradually interfacing with her. Changing her, she suspected.

TEN HOURS AFTER LEAVING THE CRASH SCAR, LVV ARRIVED AT THE sub-Charon point, called Christy. She kept the scooter hovering, puffs of gas holding her against Pluto's gentle gravity.

Sol was halfway up the sky, a diamond of light. Charon hung directly over Lvov's head, a misty blue disc, six times the size of Luna

as seen from Earth. Half the moon's lit hemisphere was turned away from Lvov, toward Sol.

Like Luna, Charon was tidally locked to its parent, and kept the same face to Pluto as it orbited. But, unlike Earth, Pluto was also locked to its twin. Every six days the worlds turned about each other, facing each other constantly, like two waltzers. Pluto-Charon was the only significant system in which both partners were tidally locked.

Charon's surface looked pocked. Lvov had her faceplate enhance the image. Many of the gouges were deep and quite regular.

She remarked on this to Cobh, at the Interface.

"The Poole people mostly used Charon material for the building of the wormhole," Cobh said. "Charon is just rock and water ice. It's easier to get to water ice, in particular. Charon doesn't have the inconvenience of an atmosphere, or an overlay of nitrogen ice over the water. And the gravity's shallower."

The wormhole builders had flown out here in a huge, unreliable GUTship. They had lifted ice and rock off Charon, and used it to construct tetrahedra of exotic matter. The tetrahedra had served as Interfaces, the termini of a wormhole. One Interface had been left in orbit around Pluto, and the other had been hauled laboriously back to Jupiter by the GUTship, itself replenished with Charon ice reaction mass.

By such crude means, Michael Poole and his people had opened up the Solar System.

"They made Lethe's own mess of Charon," Lvov said.

She could almost see Cobh's characteristic shrug. *So what?*

Pluto's surface was geologically complex, here at this point of maximal tidal stress. She flew over ravines and ridges; in places, it looked as if the land had been smashed up with an immense hammer, cracked and fractured. She imagined there was a greater mix, here, of interior material with the surface ice.

In many places she saw gatherings of the peculiar snowflakes she had noticed before. Perhaps they were some form of frosting effect, she wondered. She descended, thinking vaguely of collecting samples.

She killed the scooter's jets some yards above the surface, and let the little craft fall under Pluto's gentle gravity. She hit the ice with a soft collision, but without heat-damaging the surface features much beyond a few feet.

She stepped off the scooter. The ice crunched, and she felt layers compress under her, but the fractured surface supported her weight. She looked up toward Charon. The crimson moon was immense, round, heavy.

She caught a glimmer of light, an arc, directly above her.

It was gone immediately. She closed her eyes and tried to recapture it. *A line, slowly curving, like a thread. A web. Suspended between Pluto and Charon.*

She looked again, with her faceplate set to optimal enhancement. She couldn't recapture the vision.

She didn't say anything to Cobh.

"I was right, by the way," Cobh was saying.

"What?" Lvov tried to focus.

"The wormhole instability, when we crashed. It did cause an Alcubierre wave."

"What's an Alcubierre wave?"

"The Interface's negative energy region expanded from the tetrahedron, just for a moment. The negative energy distorted a chunk of spacetime. The chunk containing the flitter, and us."

On one side of the flitter, Cobh said, spacetime had contracted. Like a model black hole. On the other side, it expanded—like a rerun of the Big Bang, the expansion at the beginning of the Universe.

"An Alcubierre wave is a front in spacetime. The Interface—with us embedded inside—was carried along. We were pushed away from the expanding region, and toward the contraction."

"Like a surfer, on a wave."

"Right." Cobh sounded excited. "The effect's been known to theory, almost since the formulation of relativity. But I don't think anyone's observed it before."

"How lucky for us," Lvov said drily. "You said we traveled faster than light. But that's impossible."

"You can't move faster than light *within spacetime*. Wormholes are one way of getting around this; in a wormhole you are passing through a branch in spacetime. The Alcubierre effect is another way. The superluminal velocity comes from the distortion of space itself; we were carried along *within* distorting space."

"So we weren't breaking lightspeed within our raft of spacetime. But that spacetime itself was distorting at more than lightspeed."

"It sounds like cheating."

"So sue me. Or look up the math."

"Couldn't we use your Alcubierre effect to drive starships?"

"No. The instabilities and the energy drain are forbidding."

One of the snowflake patterns lay mostly undamaged, within Lvov's reach. She crouched and peered at it. The flake was perhaps a foot across. Internal structure was visible within the clear ice as layers of tubes and compartments; it was highly symmetrical, and very complex. She said to Cobh, "This is an impressive crystallization effect. If that's what it is." Gingerly, she reached out with thumb and forefinger, and snapped a short tube off the rim of the flake. She laid the sample on her desk. After a few seconds the analysis presented. "It's mostly water ice, with some contaminants," she told Cobh. "But in a novel molecular form. Denser than normal ice, a kind of glass. Water would freeze like this under high pressures—several thousand atmospheres."

"Perhaps it's material from the interior, brought out by the chthonic mixing in that region."

"Perhaps." Lvov felt more confident now; she was intrigued. "Cobh, there's a larger specimen a few feet farther away."

"Take it easy, Lvov."

She stepped forward. "I'll be fine. I—"

The surface shattered.

Lvov's left foot dropped forward, into a shallow hole; something cracked under the sole of her boot. Threads of ice crystals, oddly woven together, spun up and tracked precise parabolas around her leg.

The fall seemed to take an age; the ice tipped up toward her like an opening door. She put her hands out. She couldn't stop the fall, but she was able to cushion herself, and she kept her faceplate away from the ice. She finished up on her backside; she felt the chill of Pluto ice through the suit material over her buttocks and calves.

"...Lvov? Are you OK?"

She was panting, she found. "I'm fine."

"You were screaming."

"Was I? I'm sorry. I fell."

"You *fell*? How?"

"There was a hole, in the ice." She massaged her left ankle; it didn't seem to be hurt. "It was covered up."

"Show me."

She got to her feet, stepped gingerly back to the open hole, and held up her data desk. The hole was only a few inches deep. "It was covered by a sort of lid, I think."

"Move the desk closer to the hole." Light from the desk, controlled by Cobh, played over the shallow pit.

Lvov found a piece of the smashed lid. It was mostly ice, but there was a texture to its undersurface, embedded thread which bound the ice together.

"Lvov," Cobh said. "Take a look at this."

Lvov lifted the desk aside and peered into the hole. The walls were quite smooth. At the base there was a cluster of spheres, fist-sized. Lvov counted seven; all but one of the spheres had been smashed by her stumble. She picked up the one intact sphere, and turned it over in her hand. It was pearl-gray, almost translucent. There was something embedded inside, disc-shaped, complex.

Cobh sounded breathless. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"It's an egg," Lvov said. She looked around wildly, at the open pit, the egg, the snowflake patterns. Suddenly she saw the meaning of the scene; it was as if a light had shone up from within Pluto, illuminating her. The "snowflakes" represented *life*, she intuited; they had dug the burrows, laid these eggs, and now their bodies of water glass

lay, dormant or dead, on the ancient ice....

"I'm coming down," Cobh said sternly. "We're going to have to discuss this. Don't say anything to the Inner System; wait until I get back. This could mean trouble for us, Lvov."

Lvov placed the egg back in the shattered nest.

SHE MET COBH AT THE CRASH SCAR. COBH WAS SHOVELING NITROGEN and water ice into the life-support modules' raw material hopper. She hooked up her own and Lvov's suits to the modules, recharging the suits' internal systems. Then she began to carve GUTdrive components out of the flitter's hull. The flitter's central Grand Unified Theory chamber was compact, no larger than a basketball, and the rest of the drive was similarly scaled. "I bet I could get this working," Cobh said. "Although it couldn't take us anywhere."

Lvov sat on a fragment of the shattered hull. Tentatively, she told Cobh about the web.

Cobh stood with hands on hips, facing Lvov, and Lvov could hear her sucking drink from the nipples in her helmet. "Spiders from Pluto? Give me a break."

"It's only an analogy," Lvov said defensively. "I'm an atmospheric specialist, not a biologist." She tapped the surface of her desk. "It's not spider web. Obviously. But if that substance has anything like the characteristics of true spider silk, it's not impossible." She read from her desk. "Spider silk has a breaking strain twice that of steel, but thirty times the elasticity. It's a type of liquid crystal. It's used commercially—did you know that?" She fingered the fabric of her suit. "We could be wearing spider silk right now."

"What about the hole with the lid?"

"There are trapdoor spiders in America. On Earth. I remember, when I was a kid... The spiders make burrows, lined with silk, with hinged lids."

"Why make burrows on Pluto?"

"I don't know. Maybe the eggs can last out the winter that way. Maybe the creatures, the flakes, only have active life during the perihelion period, when the atmosphere expands and enriches." She thought that through. "That fits. That's why the Poole people didn't spot anything. The construction team was here close to the last aphe-
lion. Pluto's year is so long that we're still only half-way to the next perihelion—"

"So how do they live?" Cobh snapped. "What do they eat?"

"There must be more to the ecosystem than one species," Lvov conceded. "The flakes—the spiders—need water glass. But there's little of that on the surface. Maybe there is some biocycle—plants or burrowing animals—which brings ice and glass to the surface, from the interior."

"That doesn't make sense. The layer of nitrogen over water ice is too deep."

"Then where do the flakes get their glass?"

"Don't ask me," Cobh said. "It's your dumb hypothesis. And what about the web? What's the point of that—if it's real?"

Lvov ground to a halt. "I don't know," she said lamely. *Although Pluto/Charon is the only place in the System where you could build a spider web between worlds.*

Cobh toyed with a fitting from the drive. "Have you told anyone about this yet? In the Inner System, I mean."

"No. You said you wanted to talk about that."

"Right." Lvov saw Cobh close her eyes; her face was masked by the glimmer of her faceplate. "Listen. Here's what we say. We've seen nothing here. Nothing that couldn't be explained by crystallization effects."

Lvov was baffled. "What are you talking about? What about the eggs? Why would we lie about this? Besides, we have the desks—records."

"Data desks can be lost, or wiped, or their contents amended."

Lvov wished she could see Cobh's face. "Why would we do such a thing?"

"Think it through. Once Earth hears about this, these flake-spiders of yours will be protected. Won't they?"

"Of course. What's bad about that?"

"It's bad for us, Lvov. You've seen what a mess the Poole people made of Charon. If this system is inhabited, *a fast GUTship won't be allowed to come for us.* It wouldn't be allowed to refuel here. Not if it meant further damage to the native life forms."

Lvov shrugged. "So we'd have to wait for a slower ship. A liner; one that won't need to take on more reaction mass here."

Cobh laughed at her. "You don't know much about the economics of GUTship transport, do you? Now that the System is crisscrossed by Poole wormholes, how many liners like that do you think are still running? I've already checked the manifests. There are *two* liners capable of a round trip to Pluto still in service. One is in dry dock; the other is heading for Saturn—"

"On the other side of the System."

"Right. There's no way either of those ships could reach us for, I'd say, a year."

We only have a month's supplies. A bubble of panic gathered in Lvov's stomach.

"Do you get it yet?" Cobh said heavily. "*We'll be sacrificed*, if there's a chance that our rescue would damage the new ecology, here."

"No. It wouldn't happen like that."

Cobh shrugged. "There are precedents."

She was right, Lvov knew. There *were* precedents, of new forms of life discovered in corners of the system: from Mercury to the remote Kuiper objects. In every case the territory had been ring-fenced, the local conditions preserved, once life—or even a plausible candidate for life—was recognized.

Cobh said, "Pan-genetic diversity. Pan-environmental management. That's the key to it; the public policy of preserving all the species and habitats of Sol, into the indefinite future. The lives of two humans won't matter a damn against that."

"What are you suggesting?"

"That we don't tell the Inner System about the flakes."

Lvov tried to recapture her mood of a few days before: when Pluto hadn't mattered to her, when the crash had been just an inconvenience. *Now, suddenly, we're talking about threats to our lives, the destruction of an ecology.*

What a dilemma. If I don't tell of the flakes, their ecology may be destroyed during our rescue. But if I do tell, the GUTship won't come for me, and I'll lose my life.

Cobh seemed to be waiting for an answer.

Lvov thought of how Sol light looked over Pluto's ice fields, at dawn.

She decided to stall. "We'll say nothing. For now. But I don't accept either of your options."

Cobh laughed. "What else is there? The wormhole is destroyed; even this flitter is disabled."

"We have time. Days, before the GUTship is due to be launched. Let's search for another solution. A win-win."

Cobh shrugged. She looked suspicious.

She's right to be, Lvov thought, exploring her own decision with surprise. *I've every intention of telling the truth later, of diverting the GUTship, if I have to.*

I may give up my life for this world.

I think.

IN THE DAYS THAT FOLLOWED, COBH TINKERED WITH THE GUTDRIVE, and flew up to the Interface to gather more data on the Alcubierre phenomenon.

Lvov roamed the surface of Pluto, with her desk set to full record. She came to love the wreaths of cirrus clouds, the huge, misty moon, the slow, oceanic pulse of the centuries-long year.

Everywhere she found the inert bodies of snowflakes, or evidence of their presence: eggs, lidded burrows. She found no other life forms—or, more likely, she told herself, she wasn't equipped to recognize any others.

She was drawn back to Christy, the sub-Charon point, where the topography was at its most complex and interesting, and where the greatest density of flakes was to be found. It was as if, she thought, the flakes had gathered here, yearning for the huge, inaccessible

moon above them. But what could the flakes possibly want of Charon? What did it mean for them?

LVOV ENCOUNTERED COBH AT THE CRASH SCAR, RECHARGING HER suit's systems from the life support packs. Cobh seemed quiet. She kept her face, hooded by her faceplate, turned from Lvov.

Lvov watched her for a while. "You're being evasive," she said eventually. "Something's changed—something you're not telling me about."

Cobh made to turn away, but Lvov grabbed her arm. "I think you've found a third option. Haven't you? You've found some other way to resolve this situation, without destroying either us or the flakes."

Cobh shook off her hand. "Yes. Yes, I think I know a way. But—" "But what?"

"It's *dangerous*, damn it. Maybe unworkable. Lethal." Cobh's hands pulled at each other.

She's scared, Lvov saw. She stepped back from Cobh. Without giving herself time to think about it, she said, "Our deal's off. I'm going to tell the Inner System about the flakes. Right now. So we're going to have to go with your new idea, dangerous or not."

Cobh studied her face; Cobh seemed to be weighing up Lvov's determination, perhaps even her physical strength. Lvov felt as if she were a data desk being downloaded. The moment stretched, and Lvov felt her breath tighten in her chest. Would she be able to defend herself, physically, if it came to that? And was her own will really so strong?

I have changed, she thought. *Pluto has changed me.*

At last Cobh looked away. "Send your damn message," she said.

Before Cobh—or Lvov herself—had a chance to waver, Lvov picked up her desk and sent a message to the inner worlds. She downloaded all the data she had on the flakes: text, images, analyses, her own observations and hypotheses.

"It's done," she said at last.

"And the GUTship?"

"I'm sure they'll cancel it." Lvov smiled. "I'm also sure they won't tell us they've done so."

"So we're left with no choice," Cobh said angrily. "Look, I know it's the right thing to do. To preserve the flakes. I just don't want to die, that's all. I hope you're right, Lvov."

"You haven't told me how we're going to get home."

Cobh grinned through her faceplate. "Surfing."

"ALL RIGHT. YOU'RE DOING FINE. NOW LET GO OF THE SCOOTER." Lvov took a deep breath, and kicked the scooter away with both legs; the little device tumbled away, catching the deep light of Sol, and Lvov rolled in reaction.

Cobh reached out and steadied her. "You can't fall," Cobh said. "You're in orbit. You understand that, don't you?"

"Of course I do," Lvov grumbled.

The two of them drifted in space, close to the defunct Poole worm-hole Interface. The Interface itself was a tetrahedron of electric blue struts, enclosing darkness, its size overwhelming; Lvov felt as if she were floating beside the carcass of some huge, wrecked building.

Pluto and Charon hovered before her like balloons, their surfaces mottled and complex, their forms visibly distorted from the spherical. Their separation was only fourteen of Pluto's diameters. The worlds were strikingly different in hue, with Pluto a blood red, Charon ice blue. *That's the difference in surface composition*, Lvov thought absently. *All that water ice on Charon's surface.*

The panorama was stunningly beautiful. Lvov had a sudden, gut-level intuition of the *rightness* of the various System authorities' rigid pan-environment policies.

Cobh had strapped her data desk to her chest; now she checked the time. "Any moment now. Lvov, you'll be fine. Remember, you'll feel no acceleration, no matter how fast we travel. At the centre of an Alcubierre wave, spacetime is locally flat; you'll still be in free fall. There will be tidal forces, but they will remain small. Just keep your breathing even, and—"

"Shut up, Cobh," Lvov said tightly. "I know all this."

Cobh's desk flared with light. "*There*," she breathed. "The GUT-

drive has fired. Just a few seconds, now."

A spark of light arced up from Pluto's surface and tracked, in complete silence, under the belly of the parent world. It was the flitter's GUTdrive, salvaged and stabilized by Cobh. The flame was brighter than Sol; Lvov saw its light reflected in Pluto, as if the surface was a great, fractured mirror of ice. Where the flame passed, tongues of nitrogen gas billowed up.

The GUTdrive passed over Christy. Lvov had left her desk there to monitor the flakes, and the image the desk transmitted, displayed in the corner of her faceplate, showed a spark crossing the sky.

Then the GUTdrive veered sharply upward, climbing directly toward Lvov and Cobh at the Interface.

"Cobh, are you sure this is going to work?"

Lvov could hear Cobh's breath rasp, shallow. "Look, Lvov, I know you're scared, but pestering me with dumb-ass questions isn't going to help. Once the drive enters the Interface, it will take only seconds for the instability to set in. Seconds, and then we'll be home. In the Inner System, at any rate. Or..."

"Or what?"

Cobh didn't reply.

Or not, Lvov finished for her. *If Cobh has designed this new instability right, the Alcubierre wave will carry us home. If not—*

The GUTdrive flame approached, becoming dazzling. Lvov tried to regulate her breathing, to keep her limbs hanging loose—

"Lethe," Cobh whispered.

"What?" Lvov demanded, alarmed.

"Take a look at Pluto. At Christy."

Lvov looked into her faceplate.

Where the warmth and light of the GUTdrive had passed, Christy was a ferment. Nitrogen billowed. And, amid the pale fountains, *burrows were opening*. Lids folded back. Eggs cracked. Infant flakes soared and sailed, with webs and nets of their silk-analogue hauling at the rising air.

Lvov caught glimpses of threads, long, sparkling, trailing down to Pluto—and up toward Charon. Already, Lvov saw, some of the baby flakes had hurtled more than a planetary diameter from the surface, toward the moon.

"It's goose summer," she said.

"What?"

"When I was a kid...the young spiders spin bits of webs, and climb to the top of grass stalks, and float off on the breeze. Goose summer—'gossamer.'"

"Right," Cobh said skeptically. "Well, it looks as if they are making for Charon. They use the evaporation of the atmosphere for lift... Perhaps they follow last year's threads, to the moon. They must fly off every perihelion, rebuilding their web bridge every time. They think the perihelion is here now. The warmth of the drive—it's remarkable. But why go to Charon?"

Lvov couldn't take her eyes off the flakes. "Because of the water," she said. It all seemed to make sense, now that she saw the flakes in action. "There must be water glass on Charon's surface. The baby flakes use it to build their bodies. They take other nutrients from Pluto's interior, and the glass from Charon... They need the resources of *both* worlds to survive—"

"Lvov!"

The GUTdrive flared past them, sudden, dazzling, and plunged into the damaged Interface.

ELECTRIC-BLUE LIGHT EXPLODED FROM THE INTERFACE, WASHING over her.

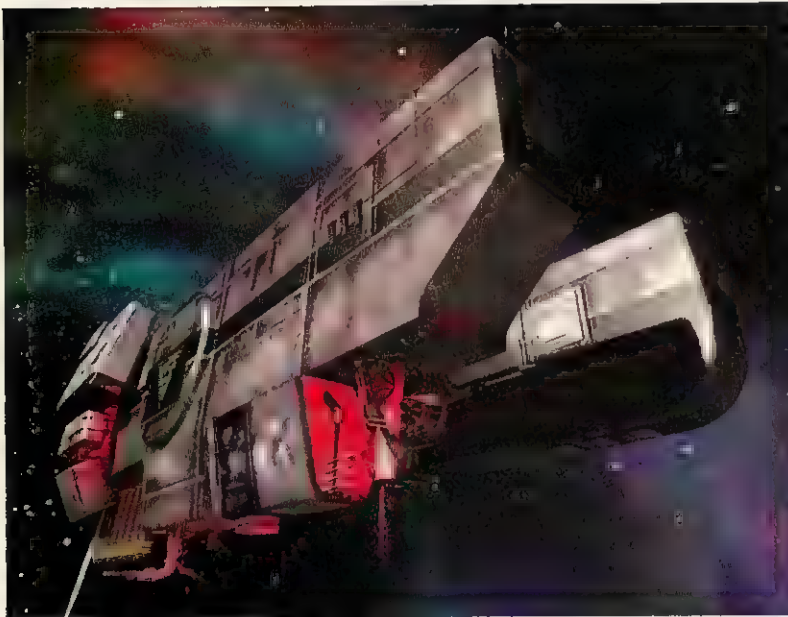
There was a ball of light, unearthly, behind her, and an irregular patch of darkness ahead, like a rip in space. Tidal forces plucked gently at her belly and limbs.

Pluto, Charon, and goose summer disappeared. But the stars, the eternal stars, shone down on her, just as they had during her childhood on Earth. She stared at the stars, trusting, and felt no fear.

Remotely, she heard Cobh whoop, exhilarated.

The tides faded. The darkness before her healed, to reveal the brilliance and warmth of Sol. □

The Daedalus Encounter moves big-budget special effects inside your PC.



ABOVE: Breathtaking video footage of *Daedalus* fly-bys are seamlessly integrated into the software. BELOW: Video games are now attracting big-screen actors and actresses. Tia Carrere stars as Ari.

NOT MANY PEOPLE REMEMBER A COMPUTER game called *Amnesia*, but those who recall it do so fondly. Author Thomas M. Disch wrote this warped murder mystery that whisked players through a nightmarish New York, and its text-based interface achieved a sense of virtuality most graphically based games never even attempt. Part of the fun was Disch's witty prose and dialogue scrolling past the screen; part of it was discovering the many inventive and interactive plot "branches," where the right (or wrong) word or action could spin the game off in a totally new direction.

The memory of *Amnesia* often resurfaces while I'm playing other games. When I was addicted to the shoot-'em-up action of *Wolfenstein 3-D*, I sometimes had the urge to take one of my Nazi targets hostage, jam the gun up his nose and pump him for valuable information. During extended *Doom* sessions (are there any other kind?), the demon carnage tempts me with grisly but intriguing possibilities: if I could only slide into the slack skin of a dead monster, could I pass peacefully amongst the others and develop a more complex strategy against them?

Not yet, I can't. Games haven't gotten that complex, but we're seeing better and better products that edge us closer to total immersion. As software designers become more ambitious, I suspect they'll need some pretty good writers to help them explore such plot-driven avenues of game play. Disch swore he'd never write another game, citing the exhausting process of gener-

ating such potentially endless plot threads.

That's to everyone's loss, especially when something like Virgin Interactive's *The Daedalus Encounter* comes along. Don't get me wrong—there's a lot to like about this game, although it's ultimately akin to admiring a science fiction movie for its scenic design and special effects while cutting it some serious slack in the script department.

In a far-future interstellar setting, a trio of former mercenaries form a deep-space salvage team. Your character, Casey, is part of the crew, only you're not quite all there. Seems that during your last big space battle—recounted through a movie segment at the game's beginning—your ejection pod was damaged and what's left of you has been downloaded into an organic computer that looks like a dishwasher. You awaken to discover that your tough space jockey pals have busted you out of the hospital before you could receive a better body. With friends like these...

Actress Tia Carrere (*Wayne's World*, *True Lies*) stars in a full-motion video as Ari. Her bantering, bickering friend (and yours), Zack, is played by Christian Bocher from the show *Limboland* on cable's Comedy Central. Your merry trio has dreams of finding treasure among the post-war wreckage you helped create, so off you zip in your little ship *Artemis* to reap the riches of the galactic rim.

Coming out of hyperspace, you collide with a vast, strange alien ship and the *Artemis* becomes wedged in its hull. After kindly reconnecting the life support system for your shaken friends (the first of many puzzles you must solve), you discover that the alien craft to which you are hopelessly attached is headed straight into a nearby sun. If you don't enter the thing and find the navigation controls, you and your friends are toast.

Things get worse. Once inside the strange vessel, you learn why these aliens haven't responded to your distress calls. They've been wiped out by an infestation of Krinn, critters Ari aptly describes as "flying piranha." Guns drawn, brows furrowed, your friends lead the way into the ship and its many mysteries.

That's a perfectly serviceable premise for a game and it makes for a visually thrilling adventure. If there's any gripe to be had, it's that the makers of *The Daedalus Encounter* have expended such energy and design into video integration that the player is too often delegated to a passive role. You may not notice this at first because the game looks simply fantastic. Your interface is a little clunky, but the video frame taking up one quarter of

the screen is filled with an impressive stream of computer-generated imagery, the best you'll see this side of the TV show *Babylon 5*.

Of particular note is the alien ship itself—dubbed *Daedalus* by Ari as a constant reminder that your goal here is to avoid the looming sun so you don't pull an *Icarus*. Imagine the synthetic machine dreams of





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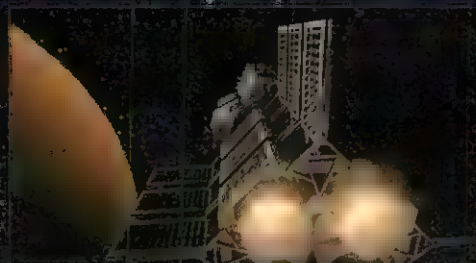
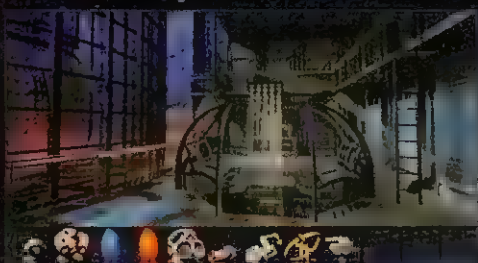
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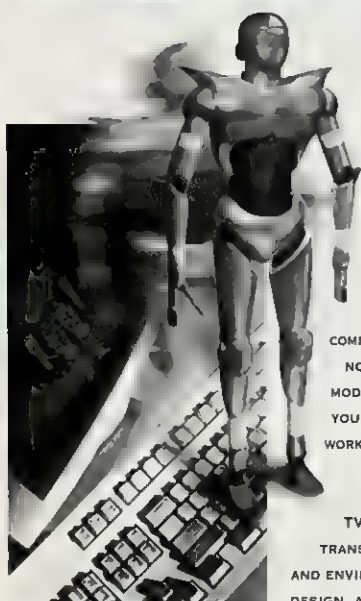


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H.R. Giger done in soft pastels and you'll have an idea of the craft's elaborate interior. The game designers make excellent use of Apple's QuickTime technology—integrating video footage seamlessly into the software—and a pair of breathtaking cinematic fly-bys of the craft's exterior are particularly well-done.

The video here rivals the high quality seen in another popular video-intensive game, *Under A Killing Moon*, and there are lots of sound effects to accompany the visuals. Whether you use a PC or a Mac, you'll need a fast machine for this game—especially if you want to tap the space bar and bring the video from one-quarter to full-screen.

You trade Casey's dishwasher for a small saucerlike probe to explore the alien ship. Although you can zip around and grapple things, there's not a heck of a lot for you to do. Here you are, a hybrid human-artificial intelligence, discovering that your friends need you mostly to open doors.

Each door inside the ship comes with a geometric puzzle to solve, and the game lets you choose the level of difficulty. If you like flipping around multicolored shapes until they fit a prescribed pattern, you'll prefer the higher setting where each puzzle must be solved in six different configurations. If you're more interested in seeing the cinematic plot unfold, the easy setting gets you to most puzzles in a minute or two.

There are tasks for Casey to complete, including at least one shoot-'em-up segment with the flying Krinn that's pretty fun. One of my favorite parts was searching a dark labyrinth of air ducts. If you're sharp and patient, you'll discover the secret chamber where the game's designers lay trapped in a series of suspended animation coffins.

One intriguing aspect of the game concerns the alien language. The aliens communicate by bursts of light, something Casey's new mechanical body can easily replicate. On each door and several surfaces you find strings of alien letters, and although you don't quite know what they mean, you can store them in your memory bank. Later, you can beam these out to anything that might look receptive to such a message. It's a fairly complex idea, one that's integral to the game's climax.

The game's packaging claims there are multiple endings depending on your actions, but aside from the expected fiery plunge into the sun, we found only two alternate endings. And as for the "navigable QuickTime" promised on the package, we encountered no such thing. You can sometimes navigate the magnificent sets here, but when a QuickTime movie revs up, your controls are dead until it's played through.

There are some honest attempts at characterization in this game, though they lean towards the cliché. The sexual tension between Ari and Zack reaches its climax with the latter's juvenile come-ons and one-liners. At one interesting point, however, Ari seems ready to reveal her attraction to Casey, but she quickly withdraws, wondering just how

much of Casey's brain still survives in the box.

Although not without its shortcomings, *The Daedalus Encounter* is an ambitious and noteworthy attempt. Think of it as just a game and you're likely to be disappointed. Consider it as a big-budget movie that lets you participate and it's much more fun.

In a sense, *The Daedalus Encounter* and *Amnesia* are two sides of the same coin. Perhaps we'll look back at them from some future vantage point, and see how inevitable it was that the best elements of both merged into the great-looking and completely involving games of the future. That's one plot branch I'd sincerely love to take.

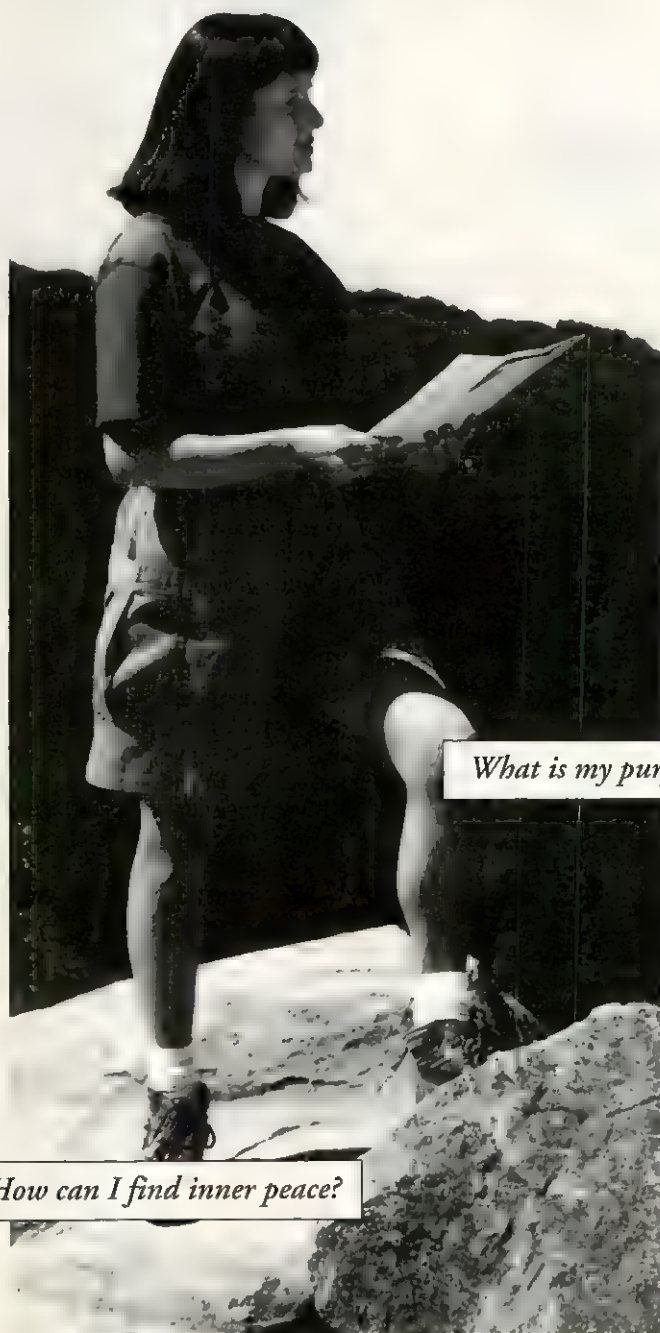
RECENT AND RECOMMENDED

•H.R. Giger revolutionized the look of science fiction with his set and character designs for *Alien*, *Alien III* and *Poltergeist II*, and now he is revolutionizing screen savers. *The H.R. Giger Screen Saver* (CyberDreams), born of the same fevered brain whose macabre SF and fantasy images won an Academy Award, includes ten different programmable modules of biomechanical magic. A bizarre cat rips through your screen, only to have its mechanical master peer out to spray-paint the rip between your reality and his black once more. Pixilated aliens grow and fade before your eyes. Surreal biological motherhips hover and disgorge their contents to scurry across the screen. The sometimes unsettling imagery is accompanied by vivid music and crisp sound effects. Each art module can be programmed to affect the rate or number of the organic forms which blend with the futuristic alien graphics. As a special bonus, the software includes "The Dreams a Nightmare Dreams," an original short story by Harlan Ellison. The program is available for both IBM-PC compatibles and the Macintosh.

•Everyone seems to be jumping on the collectable cardgame bandwagon, so why not the makers of one of the most popular computer games of all? *SimCity: The Card Game* (Mayfair Games) attempts to replicate their PC success by allowing from one to twenty players an attempt to transform a sleepy settlement into a booming metropolis. Players build their decks from a set of over 500 different cards, representing everything from a hardware store to a beach coastline to a coal-burning power plant.

The city, built of interconnecting cards, can extend as large as the table on which you're playing. With enough players, your city can encompass the entire living room floor. Once your city has grown large enough, you can put into play the longer cards available only in booster packs, which include large and unique features such as Yosemite National Park and the Grand Canyon. Cards are available in decks of 60 cards and booster packs of 14 standard-sized cards and one long card, and are classified as common, uncommon, rare, and ultra rare. Mayfair has done an excellent job of translating a classic game into a new medium. □

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TELEVISION

Continued from page 24

The show's biggest remaining hurdle is the time slot (besides *60 Minutes*, the competition includes ABC's popular *America's Funniest Home Videos* and two new sitcoms).



Rodney Rowland plays a space Marine.

"We talked to the network about that early on," Wong notes, "because we were concerned that it was an early time slot. The network assured us that we could do any sort of show we want. Except for language, they won't put any restraints on the content, the grittiness, or the hard action of war."

"Audience-wise, I don't know," Wong goes on. "When we first started, we'd always envisioned ourselves as the lead-in to *X-Files* at 8 o'clock on Friday night. We thought it was a perfect time; people were going to stay home and watch *X-Files*—they were home anyway and I think they would have enjoyed the show. It's in the same vein, only younger and with a little more action. But the network decided that they wanted to put our show after football."

Will Fox support the show if its ratings don't measure up? "I think if they believe in the show they will support it," Wong says. "So far they've been very enthusiastic and very supportive. I have to say I am worried about the time slot we're in because every show Fox has had on there has failed. It's tough: you're going up against a show, *60 Minutes*, that's been a top ten show for ten years. So yeah—I wouldn't expect any miracles."

Wong remains optimistic about the show itself, however. "I think people will get a kick out of it. We do have some fun action, and some great CGI action. When I was a kid I used to read Heinlein, and when I read those early books of his like *Starship Trooper* it was the adventure that really intrigued me, that was fun. And that's the kind of show we hope to make: a fun adventure that people can enjoy, and at the same time, hopefully get something out of it. I think we're doing that." □

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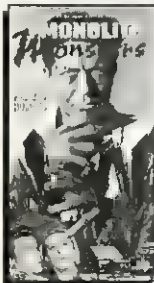
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VR MARSBASE 1

Continued from page 83

collapsed in hysteria when the sky of Mars had opened to reveal the true sky of Earth. But only time would tell if all her choices had been wise ones.

Footfalls echoed through the corridor now, and Felicia turned. It was Paxton, his rotund form moving slowly toward her from the far exit. So his meeting with the vice president had finally ended. Now she would know, one way or another.

Felicia stood as he neared her.

"Director," she said, nodding shortly. His expression was unreadable as always, and for a long moment he just stood there, unspeaking. She reached out and took his hand.

Paxton smiled. "Congratulations, Felicia. It's over."

Felicia sighed. For an instant she thought she would collapse. "They've exonerated me?" she heard herself whisper.

Paxton eased her back onto the bench and sat beside her.

"Not exactly," he said.

"Then...?"

"They're giving you a presidential commendation. You're a hero, Felicia. You brought those people out with their sanity intact. You did what Washington thought was impossible."

She felt numb.

"You gave them something to believe in, something to get them over the shock. Now the psychologists can treat it just like any other cult brainwashing. It will take years of therapy for most of them, but not one suffered a psychotic break. We're all very proud of you." He winked. "Especially me."

"I...I don't know what to say. I thought...I thought..."

"I know. It'll take time to adjust to this new reality—for you and for them."

"I'd like to be a part of it," she said, indicating the one-way glass and the cubicles beyond. "I'd like to help."

Paxton nodded. "I thought you might. I've already cleared it for you."

She took his hand again, squeezed tightly. "Thank you. Thank you so much."

Paxton stared straight ahead, unblinking.

"What is it?" Felicia asked.

Paxton took several moments to gather his thoughts. "This whole thing has put a crimp in NASA's plans. We're having to start all over from scratch. Burket's gone; the team is out of it. We'll have to put the pieces together all over again."

"What are you talking about?" Felicia asked.

Paxton finally turned to look at her. "I'm assembling a new team, and now I know we'll be needing a crack psychologist. So I have another little job for you, Dr. Wells. That is, if you're interested."

Felicia had her answer ready before he asked the question.

"How would you like to go to Mars?" □

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DEADLY HUMOUR

Continued from page 70

of its tombe, but I fear I was not as subtle as I did suppose, for of a sudden, I found myself pushed into a cellar, and the bar shot to, imprisoning me there, where there was a great stench, and I did see that the earth of the floor was much dug up, and in digging there a little with my bare hands, I did discover the carcass of a man, much decay'd. Then I was in great fear and trouble of my mind for being in the hands of one who was either a madman or a blood-drinker, and I did pray with mighty fervor to God that he might save me from this pass. But by and by comes Will Hower, with the Watch that he had summoned, and I calling out, they did free me from that place, I praising Almighty God for my deliverance.

And when they did dig in that cellar, they brought out the remains of above twenty men and women, all of them taken from their tombes or killed by Roche in the conduct of his experiments, so that no man could tell which was which, they being all decay'd together. Then the Watch took up Roche and bore him to prison, but he made shift to kill himself by severing the great arteries of his arms and did bleed to death, a fitting end for one who had let so much blood from others. So that he was not hanged, but buried as a suicide at a crossroads, and I with my own hands did transfix his heart with a stake, against his rising again. Which you might well wonder at, knowing me to be a man of reason and not given to superstitions, and indeed I had placed little credit in the stories of devils and Greek *vrykolaks* and their rising from the grave, thinking their empty coffins more likely the work of grave robbers, as it did prove to be, and Roche a madman beyond doubt.

Yet Almighty God knows what things are possible in this world and the next, and a suicide is a man cursed, and a fit abode for devils, do they exist. And it is true also that whether such devils and witches do exist, men do everywhere believe it to be so, though they do not in England speak these days of those *vrykolaks* and blood-drinkers, from which I conclude that those late rumours did originate with Roche and his grave robbing, and die with him, and I for my part would more easily believe in a grave robber than in the dead rising from their graves, and so I believe it must be with other Englishmen.

But I must admit as well that there are some experiments that wise men must not try, lest this outcry against the philosophers begin again and bring down more trouble, which we might not escape so easily as I did from Roche's cellar, thanks be to God!

I AM, SIR, YOUR MOST HUMBLE AND OBEDIENT servant,

S. Pepys, President,

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SPEARMINT

Continued from page 75

What'll she eat? I asked. A bottle, the nice nurse said. And she showed me one. With powdered stuff in a can you mix with water. They're already feeding her the bottle.

I hate them.

When they told me, I screamed. I cried. I kicked and yelled. I threw things all over the room. Then they gave me another shot and I slept a long time.

I woke up feeling like there was cotton wool in my mouth. But there wasn't. I checked. I cried some more. They brought me food. My favorite—steak and potatoes and apple pie. But I didn't eat it.

I want Dolly to come home with us!

She's my Baby. Why won't they let me take her?

I love Dolly. She's so cute. She smiles now. She holds my finger in her tiny little hand. So tight! She makes cute noises, sort of chirpy and cooey like a birdie.

I miss her already.

THEY SAID I COULD GO TO DOLLY'S ROOM. TO say bye-bye to her. They weren't going to let me at first. The mean doctor said, no, she'll just start acting out again. But Mommy said, please, please. She made me promise I'd be good if they'd say yes. I swallowed hard, and my voice was all tiny and shaky when I said I promise.

I wish I could look at her all day. Kiss her and kiss her. I want to cry, but I'm being very good. I remember my promise. Swallowing all those tears down is giving me a sore throat.

I stroke Dolly's fuzzy little head. She's smiling at me and waving her hands.

I whisper in her ear, I love you.

But she's just a baby. What if she forgets me? Like Betsy and Sarah and Kitty?

So then I get this idea. My Blankie. She can't forget me if she has my Blankie. I kiss it and give it to her.

She's starting to fall asleep, so I tuck her in with Blankie, cozy around her chin. It looks so—so right there, as she snuggles inside it.

Mommy's saying it's time to go.

Bye-bye Dolly.

ALMOST DOWN THE HALL, HOLDING MOMMY'S hand.

I'm leaving and my Dolly is staying! Once more, I want to see her once more, all snuggled up in Blankie.

I can't go, I can't! Once more! Just one more time! Then I'll be good, I promise, I swear.

I tear my hand away from Mommy's. Come back! she screams. She's running, but I'm faster. So fast, so fast! To my baby's room.

I'm almost there! I'm there! In the doorway, opening the door, going to kiss her and—

The scream tears from my throat. No! No! Nooo!

He's here. Bending over her, giving her a shot. □

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ALLAN COLE IS AN INTERNATIONALLY best-selling author whose works include the Sten and Antero series as well as several historical novels. He is currently writing his sixteenth book, *When the Gods Slept*, the first in the Timura Trilogy for del Rey. He lives on a ranch in Elephant Butte, New Mexico along with his strongest supporter and his writer's gnome, "Squeaker." **Joel Naprstek** has taught at the School of Visual Arts, and he is currently teaching at the Joe Kubert School. He has recently completed a graphic novel based on the Flying Tigers for Kitchen Sink.

B. W. Clough published her first fantasy novel, *The Crystal Crown* in 1984, followed by *The Dragon of Mishbil*, *The Realm Beneath*, and *The Name of the Sun*. Her latest book, *An Impossumble Summer*, is a children's novel set in her own house on her own street in Virginia, where she lives in a cottage at the edge of a forest. **Paul Di Filippo** is on assignment for *Wired Magazine*, interviewing Gentry Lee on SF and electronic games. His recent book reviews have appeared in *The Washington Post* and *IASFM*. Not only has **Al Kamajian** worked as a scientific illustrator for publishers such as Time-Life Books and Scientific American, but his artistic endeavors also include art directing TV commercials.

Kandis Elliot heads a multimedia press facility in scientific illustration and desktop publication at the University of Wisconsin's Department of Botany. Her short stories often incorporate biological sciences, which she has felt under-represented in SF, and have been seen in *IASFM*, *Tomorrow*, *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, and *The Journal of Irreproducible Results*.

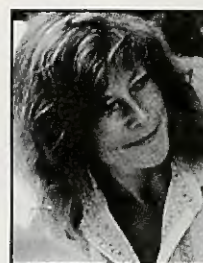
Janet Aulisio Dannheiser studied at the New York Scenic School of Design and the Ridgewood School of Art in New Jersey. Her illustrations have been appearing for seventeen years in the genre's largest magazines. **Adam-Troy Castro**'s most recent short story sales include horror fiction to the anthologies *Blood Muse* and *Elsewheres*. His horrific novelette "Locusts" will be the cover story of a future issue of *F&SF*.

Rachel Russell is the managing editor of *BioScience*. Her fiction has been published in

Heliocentric Net, *Unreality* and *The Urbanite*. Her B.A. is from the University of Illinois with a double major in English and Rhetoric. **Pete Manison** began writing science fiction thirteen years ago, inspired by the works of Frank Herbert, Frederik Pohl and Arthur C. Clarke. In 1989, his story "Mother of Chaos" won a finalist slot in the Writers of the Future contest, and since then, his short fiction has appeared in two *WOTF* anthologies and many magazines. He is a physical fitness enthusiast and life-long resident of Houston, Texas. **Stephen Baxter** began earning his well-deserved reputation as one of the new young turks of hard SF with the publication of "The Xeelee Flower" in *Interzone* in 1987. His first novel, *Raft*, was published to critical acclaim.



Steve Baxter



Kandis Elliot

BATYA SWIFT YASGUR RECENTLY won the Robert L. Fish Award from the Mystery Writers of America for Best First Short Story. She has appeared in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* and will soon be published in *F&SF*. Her two non-fiction books, *Keep It Fresh* and *Goodbye, Diapers*, were published by Berkeley. **Elizabeth Hand** is hard at work on her new novel *Glimmering*, to be published by Harper Collins. Also soon to appear is her novelization of Terry Gilliam's latest movie, *The Twelve Monkeys*. **Esther Friesner** has published twenty-two novels so far, winning the Romantic Times Award for Best Fantasy Writer in 1986 and the Skylark Award in 1994. Her short story "All Vows" was a finalist for the Nebula in 1994. Her *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* novel, *Warchild*, made the *USA Today* Bestseller list.

Clark Perry has appeared in the anthologies *Young Blood* and *Ghosts*. He has been a dishwasher, necrologist, soda jerk, film critic, and co-author of a travel guide to northwest Florida, where he makes his home. **Lois Tilton**'s most recent novels are *Darkness on Ice*, a World War II thriller with vampires, and a novel based on *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*. **Dan Perez** recently edited a special issue magazine for Sovereign Media, *Sci-Fi TV Fall Preview*. He has short stories in the anthologies *100 Vicious Little Vampires*, *Xanadu 3* and *100 Wicked Little Witches*. □



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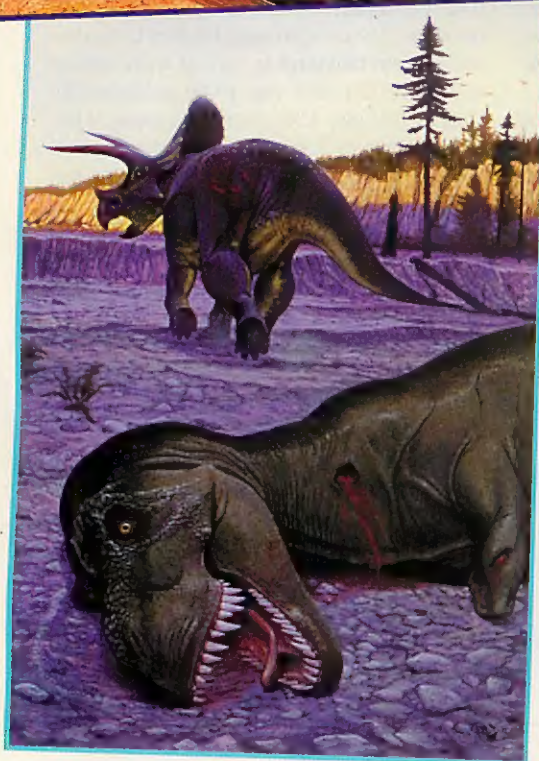
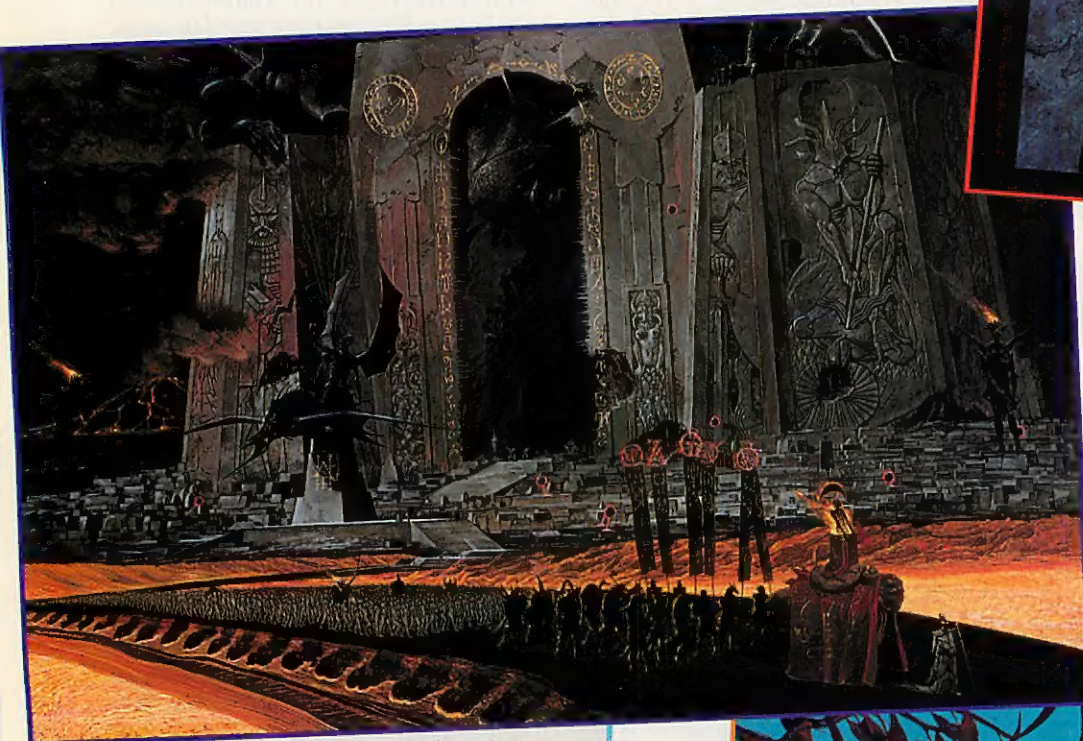


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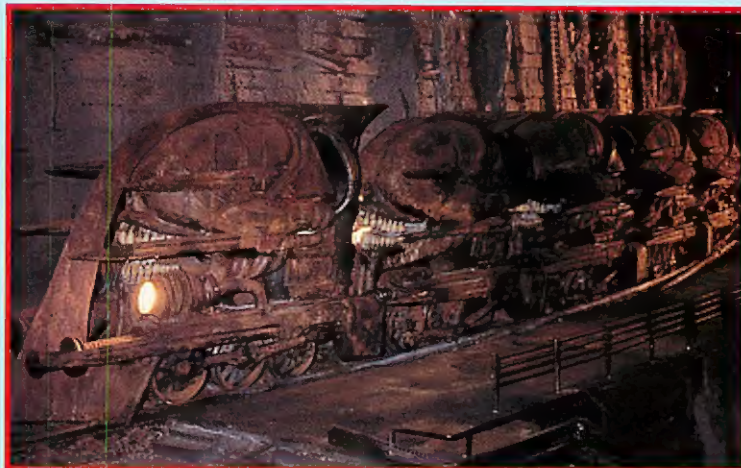
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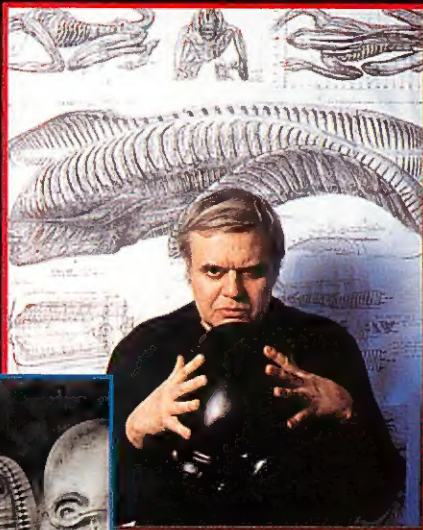
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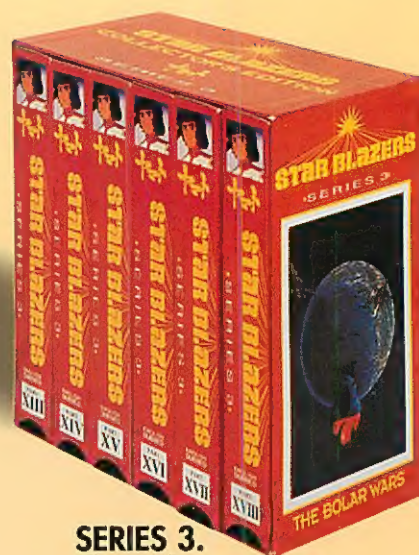
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